

Books By Mrs Robert Henrey

The Farm Books

*A FARM IN NORMANDY

THE RETURN TO THE FARM (*Peter Davies*)

The London Trilogy

*A VILLAGE IN PICCADILLY

THE INCREDIBLE CITY

THE SIEGE OF LONDON

History

LONDON

Autobiography

A JOURNEY TO GIBRALTAR

THE FOOLISH DECADE

THE KING OF BRENTFORD (*Peter Davies*)

A FILM STAR IN BELGRAVE SQUARE (*Peter Davies*)

Fiction

DELPHINE (*Peter Davies*)

AN ATTIC IN JERMYN STREET

PHILIPPA

**In collaboration with her husband*

PHILIPPA

by

MRS ROBERT HENREY



LONDON

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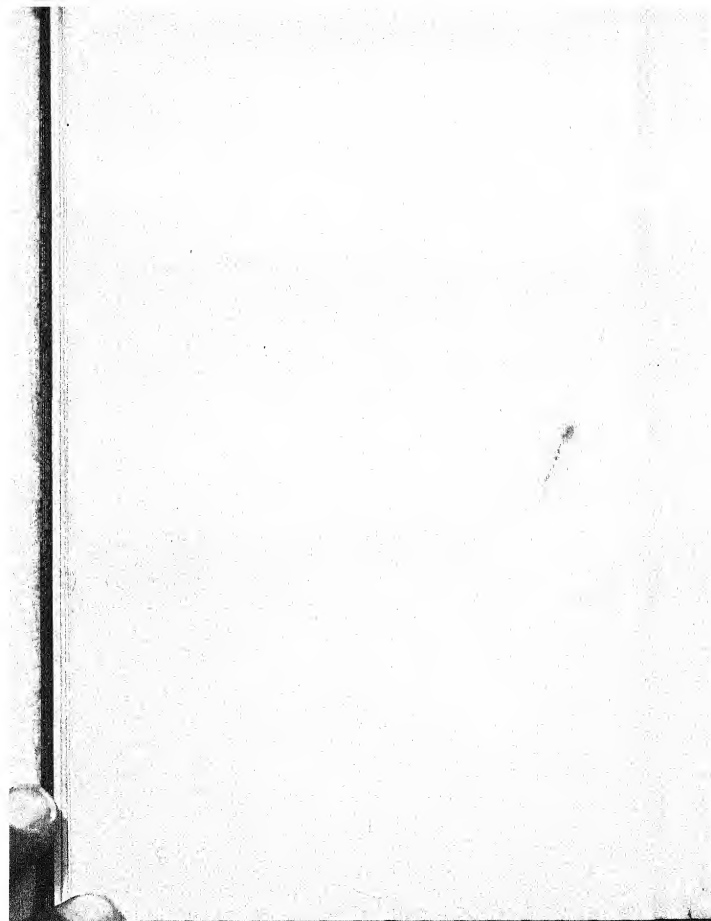
J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
Aldine House · Bedford St. · London

Printed in Great Britain
by
The Sidney Press Ltd.
London and Bedford
First published 1949



FOR
JULIA CAIRNS





I

PHILIPPA threw out an inattentive good-night to her parents, and hurried angrily to her bedroom along the dark corridor of the Queen Anne rectory. When she opened the door, the wind, in a sudden gust, caught the chintz curtains and shook them. She went to the window and looked fretfully at a car with its headlights full on, approaching nearer and nearer, now flashing past between the rectory and the low Saxon church which, with its flat, sloping gravestones, slept in a milky dolefulness on the other side of the main road to London. How fortunate were the people in this large, rich-looking car to be rushing, as she supposed they were, towards the absorbing interests of city life! How detestable these first warm winds of October which blow down the leaves and put one's nerves on edge!

All through dinner her parents had discussed a letter which her father, the Rev. Marc Dale, had pulled out of his shiny black alpaca coat, a letter from Gregory who was proving as successful at Oxford as Marc had been thirty-five years earlier. Marc was immensely proud of his son's scholastic and athletic achievements. He himself had really never left the university, having been given this living by the college of which he was a Fellow, less to look after the parishioners, than to allow him every facility to write his great work on the sixteenth century.

To have a son, to have a son at Oxford, had always



been what Marc had wanted more than anything else in the world. He wanted it as much as some people want success or fame. Gregory was certainly gifted, but it had been very touching to see how in the big study full of books, the boy, when he was little had learnt from his father. They had understood each other perfectly, the boy as anxious to benefit from his father's learning, as the father was determined to live again, but more brilliantly, in his son.

Whenever Gregory announced some new achievement in one of his letters from Oxford, Marc would exclaim :

" I knew it, my dear Margaret. How could it have been otherwise?"

He wanted him to be president of the Union, to glide down the Cherwell and to make friends with the more brilliant undergraduates—those who later might become dons or lights in the legal world. But during the last few months, life was becoming more expensive, and Marc hardly knew how to pay his son's bills.

" It will cost us another fifty pounds," he said looking up anxiously at his wife and holding the letter rather nervously between his finger and thumb. " But it is certainly necessary. What do you say, my dear? We can hardly stint the boy."

" I shall economise in the house," said Mrs. Dale quietly, considering the Virginia creeper which was beginning to turn copper.

Silence followed these two statements. Mrs. Dale was aware that it was not so much the house that would suffer as Philippa, and she was anxious not to meet her daughter's eyes. Neither she nor her husband had any personal requirements, but they were taking it a little too much for granted, perhaps, that Philippa had all she needed. The maid took away the plates. Philippa said nothing, but a

curious change was taking place in her mind. Hitherto she had quietly accepted the general feeling that though not unloved, she was less important than her brother. She was the elder, the big disappointment. Her parents had been so certain that they were going to have a boy that they named him Philip in advance and even entered him for his public school before he was born! But when he was born, he proved to be a girl. They did not hide their disappointment.

To-night Philippa had looked at the sombre dining-room, at her parents, at the little maid from the village, and felt suddenly, unaccountably, that she was tired of them all. She would be twenty-two before the end of the year and for the first time it struck her that something essential was missing from her life.

"Old Ganner has promised to bring us a little butter to-morrow," said Mrs. Dale.

And Philippa had answered, biting her lips:

"I couldn't care less!"

The moon had risen over the Saxon church, making the yew tree in the churchyard dismally eerie. She could hear an owl hooting, and the house was beginning to creak.

Quickly she closed out the night, and repeated for the edification of the empty room the words she was now rather ashamed of having thrown at her mother:

"I couldn't care less!"

Her voice was warm, musical, pitched rather low.

She allowed this expression of revolt to echo for a while in her mind, as if trying to discover exactly what she had meant by it. Then she looked curiously into the mirror. This upheaval which was making her so difficult to live with, so unkind to those whom she loved, so jealous, was

at the same time revealing things about herself which she had not noticed before, that she was something very much better than an imitation boy. Her mother's anxiety from the very beginning that her daughter should put religious and household matters before coquetry, that she should learn to sacrifice her pleasures in favour of the two men, had given Philippa, in her simple clothes, an unprepossessing look. What was there suddenly that made her wish so violently to announce her own character, to enhance these delicate lines, this intelligent forehead by which she could combine the accomplishments of a man and the seductiveness of a beautiful young woman?

Her father had never tutored her as he had tutored Gregory. She had been obliged, as in everything else, to make do with what was left over. But his immense library was at her absolute disposal, and though her reading had not been directed like Gregory's along set channels, she had taught herself Italian and French, and plunged excitedly into her father's rarest books nearly every one of which had come up to be read at night when the house was fast asleep.

By normal standards, she was less brilliant than her brother. At school she had shown only the slightest interest in certain subjects necessary for school certificate, but in other, more dreamy ways, she had accumulated an immense amount of knowledge.

The Rev. Marc Dale had, in his younger days, discovered books of fascinating interest not only in England but also in Paris, in Rome and Florence. Some had become extremely valuable. It was whilst reading the chronicles of Froissart that Philippa had suddenly become proud to bear that name which her parents had given her in such an off-hand way. She had stumbled upon the piece about

Edward the Third and the siege of Calais, how the king insisted that six of the principal citizens should come out with their heads and feet bare, with ropes round their necks, and the keys of the town in their hands. Then it was his queen Philippa had exclaimed: "Ah, gentle sir, for your love to me, be merciful to these men."

What magnificent moments she had spent imagining, as she lay in bed, the scene Froissart describes. "Ah, lady, I wish you had been anywhere else but here; you have entreated me in such a manner that I cannot refuse."

After that first taste of romance, she was continually taking books from her father's library to pretend she was some heroine of the past. One night she fell on a thin volume by Margaret of Valois, erudite and witty princess who married Henry the Fourth of France, was imprisoned in a castle, seduced the governor and charmed the world with her poetry. The volume contained the fanciful conversation of the authoress with a fine cavalier 'splendid to look at but as stupid as *she* was learned.'

To be clever as well as pretty; this indeed was an exciting notion!

Philippa deliberately chose from her father's shelves books written by women. What a great number had lived excitedly! Perhaps, after all, it was not such an unfortunate thing to be born a woman? It might even be turned to advantage. She read about Mrs. Aphra Behn whom Charles the Second sent to spy in Holland and who, on her return, charmed London with her plays, asking:

"... pray tell me then,

Why women should not write as well as men?"

Why not indeed? On the other side of the Channel, while the court of Louis XIV was at its most brilliant, another woman, Mme. de La Fayette, had just written,

under an assumed name, her novels: *The Princess of Cleves* and *Záýde* upon which all novels since, for form, have been based. Oh, what a glorious thing to invent a new vehicle for writing! Those who, like Gregory, were apt to throw out, at times, a derogatory phrase about female novelists had obviously forgotten, through too long a sojourn in their colleges, that a woman had shown the way.

The Princess of Cleves especially impressed Philippa for this novel shows the clash between love and duty, and undoubtedly, as we shall presently see, Philippa's own life was influenced by it.

What wealth of feminine genius in this corner of Marc Dale's library—Mme. de Sévigné whose letters to her daughter were bound in eight superb volumes; next to them the works of Mme. d'Aulnoy who wrote fairy tales long before Grimm and Andersen, and whose visit to the court of Charles the Second produced delightful glimpses of Whitehall and The Mall.

By the time Philippa had acquainted herself with these fine brains of the 17th century, she was fully conscious of the superiority of her sex. She went on reading books by women to penetrate their emotions and share, in imagination, their triumphs. She was now ready for writers of the 18th century—for Lady Mary Wortley Montagu whose letters from Turkey during her husband's embassy there, are so riotously picturesque and when, in the evening, the rector and Mrs. Dale had been more than usually depressing, it was fun, with Lady Mary Montagu, to go quite naked to the baths in Adrianople where, amongst marble fountains, and served by slaves, the women of the town told the news and invented the scandal. But if one dressed? Ah, that was another thing. How insignificant

are men's prerogatives, compared to the excitement of changing oneself into a Turkish lady with drawers of rose-coloured damask, a caftan entirely fitting one's shape, and fastened with a girdle of diamonds and precious stones, and a head-dress with a plume of heron's feathers! Or to visit a harem, being met at the door by a black eunuch and conducted through rooms where she-slaves finely apparelled were ranged on either side. Dreams,—impossible ever to happen to Philippa? But suppose Lady Louis Mountbatten had written from India in our own day, letters as full and warm, describing the dying wonders of an equally romantic land?

Yes, those letters of Lady Mary's made Philippa read half the night. They were feeding her need for romance and modelling her character. They uncovered a will power that perhaps was latent, merely waiting to be stressed, for did she not feel a tinge of satisfaction when, in those letters to the waspish Alexander Pope, Lady Mary scored so prodigiously over him?

Marc Dale had always loved rare bindings. First editions had been comparatively easy to come upon in his young days and when they were bound in contemporary calf, there was something evocative in the mere handling of them. Two tiny volumes of orange colour worked with golden leaves and flowers, had a picture of bonneted Mme. de Graigny, who had a *salon* in the reign of Louis XV. The cleverest men of the period paid their respects to her. Philippa would have liked to taste the power which in those days brought men of distinction so obediently to one's heel. Her novel, bound in these orange volumes, called *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, was about the Incas whose sun temples were of pure gold.

Then, without premeditation, she fell upon Fanny

Burney, starting by the first volume of the diaries in which the writer, so young, so naive, describes the immense, breath-catching success of her first novel *Evelina*, and from this, all about the Thrales and Samuel Johnson, and Philippa never stopped reading till she had steeped herself in the atmosphere of George the Third's stolid but endearing court at Windsor or at Kew Gardens. And from cross-reference to cross-reference she searched for the journal of Lady Coke, who played away her pin-money each night but was so cheerful and catty; the correspondence of Fanny's aged friend, Mrs. Delany, redolent of sermons and an Irish cleric's garden in its high glow of beauty; the journals of the Misses Berry; and the letters of Mme. du Deffand in Paris to Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill.

Philippa had listened to the cries of the French Revolution coming up across space and time to her room. Two faded volumes between boards backed with leather contained the agonising story of Marie Antoinette told by her woman in waiting, Mme. Campan. Mme. de La Rochejaquelein, riding through the night like the wind, giving birth to a child between breakfast and lunch, recounted for Philippa in breathless memoirs, the ill-timed royalist revolt in the Vendée; Mme. de Genlis, writer of stories, told of her miserable wanderings across Germany, a refugee.

Quite a big part of the rector's library contained books about the Napoleonic period, and for one entire holiday Philippa lived with the most adventurous, the most colourful and the charmingly feminine of all her heroines, the Duchess of Abrantès, whose husband was that delightfully bombastic general who stole the church plate from Lisbon, and who was always getting into trouble with Napoleon. After that, to learn about Paris during the Restoration, she turned to the diaries of the Countess of Boigne, whose

miniature by Isabey filled her with ecstatic admiration.

No real idea can be obtained of the state of Philippa's mind at this period unless one stresses the extent of this strain on her imagination. The genius of Mme. de Staël thus found an unusually fertile terrain in this sensitive young woman, who quickly realised that the basic idea of *Delphine* and *Corinne* was the same—both heroines find life made difficult for them by being more clever than the majority of men they come in contact with. Up till then Philippa had imagined that to be sensitive and erudite led one to success as quickly as to be pretty and graceful. Did it happen in real life that a too clever young woman was almost bound to suffer, that she sometimes ran into tragedy? Being erudite places one in a sort of vacuum, makes one more critical, has the effect of making men fight shy of one. She read as a sort of balm the quiet, unruffling novels of Jane Austen, but was soon again shaken by the too near reality of the grave-soaked home of the Brontës, their novels, the wonderful life of them by Mrs. Gaskell.

George Sand overwhelmed her. Everything about this Frenchwoman was brilliant, the remarkable men she loved and who loved her, the passionate spirit of her writing, the intense capacity of her heroines for love, *Indiana*, *Leone Leoni*, her tear-provoking pastorals, and George Eliot, whose humaneness, whose powers of describing how tragedy can come over a good and kind family also make one cry, the *Mill on the Floss*, especially, with Maggie who, like Philippa, loved to dig into books. From here, Philippa travelled to the sharp femininity of Colette who, to learn to write, had been locked up with paper and pen by her journalist husband, being obliged to collaborate

with him in her first two books, then magnificently soaring off on her own, proving quickly that all the genius was hers. Philippa moved feverishly from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and thence to Elizabeth Bowen, whose *The Last September* filled her with the music of dialogue, the mysteriousness of Ireland, but a disquieting fear of not getting married. In *The Death of the Heart* her own was torn whilst the melody and power of the writing ran through and through her head. She considered Elizabeth Bowen the greatest of modern writers.

This intense course of reading, whilst giving Philippa deep satisfaction, also at times made her depressed. When she had exhausted the women writers in her father's library she hardly knew where to turn. Gregory, even had she asked his advice, would not have been much use to her. After a great deal of discussion it had been decided that he was neither to read for history nor take Holy Orders. His interests, reflecting the tendency of the times, had become mathematical and scientific, and he had shaken off his classical knowledge with the ease of a person to whom everything comes so quickly that it ceases to have value.

During the summer vacation Philippa had not talked much about *her* future. She and Gregory had ridden together on hacks provided by Ganner, the farmer who sold butter to Mrs. Dale. On several occasions Gregory had gone to stay with friends, and in August he had spent a fortnight in the south of France, but he never brought any of his companions home. Philippa asked him, a little self-consciously, if he had fallen in love yet, but he had said "no" without the slightest sign of confusion. Though they were still linked by memories of childhood, she had found

her brother slipping away from her. Their interests and aptitudes had developed spontaneously in different directions. Their desires and emotions had no longer anything in common. She was surprised to discover how they were growing up into such totally different creatures.

More than once Philippa decided she would leave her parents and work in London, but though she might have earned quite a large salary as a secretary, her mother implored her not to go and, more from weakness than anything else, she had agreed to stay.

At breakfast that morning she had read out in a tone of amazement a paragraph in the paper about a black mass that had 'been celebrated in a 13th century church in Devonshire.

"Would you have believed it?" she queried. "Nowadays, I mean?"

"I would believe anything," answered her father understandingly. "Wars which in some ways put us forward hundreds of years, in other ways—in matters of superstition, for instance—often take men back to the days of the Tudors. It is as if contrary forces were tugging at humanity."

"Of course," she answered, remembering her father's researches into the sixteenth century. "It's very much your subject, I suppose."

In the kitchen she tried to recall what a black mass consisted of. Perhaps she had never known. The newspaper said that the singed paw of a white kitten had been left behind. She remembered that there was a small section of her father's library where he kept valuable books on magic and witchcraft, and as she was still looking for something to read in the evenings she thought these might prove amusing.

Later, finding the library empty, she went to explore. The bindings shone with pleasant, warm colours. She chose half a dozen of the most mysterious looking and, taking them up to her room, hid them under her pillow.

As soon as she was in bed she opened one at random. The author, whose portrait was on the frontispiece, was a certain Balthasar Bekker, a 17th century pastor of Amsterdam, whose hair fell straight and wiry about his long, wrinkled cheeks.

Her fingers trembled a little as she turned the leaves, but she found it difficult to read at all fast these lines in French where all the "s's" looked like "f's," and where the words, strange words, were so often abbreviated. Pastor Bekker had collected all the current stories of witchery. There was a boy in Somerset who was under a spell from an old woman. Every time he opened his mouth nails fell out as in the fairy story about the ungenerous prince who refused to bring up water for a thirsty woman at the well.

Philippa laid Bekker aside and examined the next book in the little bunch. She liked to plunge haphazardly into this strange literature. The new book, bottle-green with roses worked on the spine, and a golden coat of arms with a lion rampant on the front, had been made in 1614 and was called: *The Evenings of Sieur Bouchet*. Above the imprint was a skull and cross-bones, three ostrich feathers, and a crown.

She handled the binding amorously, and then turned the pages.

Sieur Bouchet, at table, made merry by an excellent meal and good wine, was discussing with a few friends such subjects as women, newly-wed couples, expectant mothers, men, the whipped or the hanged, ghosts and madmen.

This was not quite what Philippa had expected. She

continued to turn the delicate pages, thin as tissue paper, light brown and waxen, not quite sure which passages to read.

"And if you wish to discover if a man is virile"—these words caught her eyes—"amongst many other signs, these are infallible: first, that he should have a deep voice; second, that his beard should be tough and dark; third, that his nose should be extra large . . . and it is best that you should wait till he returns home from a gallop on his fastest horse, for then his blood will be in ebullition."

She looked up uneasily, staring for a few moments at the pink lampshade. Then, shaking her hair to put an end to the fixity of her gaze, she allowed the volume to slip on to the carpet. She took up the others, intending they should share the same fate. They were so smooth to the touch, so delicately worked, that she hesitated. As she glanced at the title, she read: *The Perverted Peasant Boy and Peasant Girl*. There were several volumes of this work, and on opening one her eyes fell on the delicate but voluptuous plates in the first edition of Rétif de La Bretonne's famous book on the dangers of the town.

At the sight of these pictures her confusion increased and her face became red. A sudden burning sensation ran up her spine, and she jumped out of bed, agitated, irresolute, hurrying as far as the window, which she now flung wide open, allowing the wind to bathe her cheeks and entangle her hair. Opposite, slept her father's Saxon church whose beautiful lines stood out strong, but full of occult mystery, under the dark boughs of the aged yew. Exasperated, she clutched the sides of the window, and there came up to her from the humid ground all the smells of the night, while from the cedar in her father's garden an owl made its melancholy cry.

II

SHE had been a long time falling asleep.

First she had heard midnight striking above the churchyard. Birds which might have been geese flew low in the direction of the river. The wind became less strong. Then she dozed, and remembered nothing except that occasionally, when turning over, she became aware of rain coming down monotonously.

Now that it was time to get up, large drops fell at intervals down the chimney against paper and wood in the fireplace. The air was damp and uninviting, and through the open window she could hear starlings and tits poisoning themselves on the Virginia creeper which, thus shaken, dropped water on to the path leading from the house to the road.

She put on her dressing-gown and, taking her soap and a towel, hurried along the narrow panelled corridor to the bathroom which had been put in when Gregory and she were little as an adjunct to the nursery. There were coloured tiles with Dutch girls in clogs and red-sailed boats above the bath, which had one leg missing.

As soon as she turned the tap there was a splutter, a sudden silting up, and then a trickle of yellow water against stained enamel. After a while, though the water became clear and almost warm, it cooled immediately because of the morning air coming through the open window. Wasting as little time as possible, Phillippa returned to the

bedroom, where her tweed skirt and green jumper lay across the back of a chair.

She dressed quickly and made her bed. By this time she had regained her usual brightness, and ran lightly, almost joyously, down the narrow stairs with their chocolate-coloured banisters.

When she reached the hall she glanced affectionately at her father's raincoat and soft hat hanging from a peg by the front door. Then she turned gracefully into the morning room, whose three large windows faced the gardens and the orchard.

Breakfast was served on a white cloth at the end of the long table. Doris, the little maid from the village, was responsible for getting it ready, and at nine o'clock the gong sounded.

Marc Dale's chair was at the head of the table. There was a pile of letters and learned periodicals beside his plate. Philippa went through them quickly. Three bore the Oxford postmark. Mrs. Dale also had some letters and a catalogue from Harrods. Philippa was disappointed, once again, to find nothing at her place. Nobody ever wrote to her except Christine, her school-friend, who now lived independently in London.

She went to a window to inspect the garden, where the paths were covered in soaked brown leaves. The rain had stopped, but all the trees and plants were sodden. What a beautiful view, across the orchards towards the violet hills which had not changed since the house was built two and a half centuries earlier!

As soon as her parents came down Philippa passed behind her father's chair and, placing her hands on his shoulders, lightly kissed him. There was a pretty affection in this gesture, as if she felt that whereas for her mother

Gregory was everything, Marc could sometimes be influenced. Was she not gradually reading all his books, imbibing his secret thoughts?

"What a morning!" exclaimed Marc, opening *The Times*. "It must have rained all night."

"I hope you slept well, my dear?" said Mrs. Dale.

She was opening the catalogue from Harrods and, having glanced through it quickly, handed it to her daughter.

"It seems silly for young people to go back to the long skirt," she said, without much interest.

Philippa looked at the autumn costumes. She was divided between a longing to dress better and a feeling that there was nobody to care. The tea was black but tepid; the toast dry, Mrs. Dale having sent the butter that week to Gregory to supplement his rations. "After all," she had said to Philippa, "we can so easily go without."

It was Philippa's custom after breakfast to take her father into his study. She liked to see that his desk was in order and the fire gay with logs, the sort from the orchard that smelt good. At the corner of the fire there was a wing-back chair on which Marc laid his morning paper. When inspiration would not come, he would have a nap in this chair while the clock ticked on the mantelpiece and the wind whistled outside. This was one of the few male prerogatives Philippa condoned.

As she sharpened a pencil she saw to the left of the Flemish tapestry the gap made in one of the shelves by the removal of the volumes which were now in her bedroom. She would have liked to have questioned her father about them, but decided it was not the moment. She looked up at him quickly, admiring his profile, in which there was a mixture of strength and fatigue.

As soon as she was satisfied that her father was comfortable

she returned to the morning room to clear away the breakfast and help Doris wash up. The rectory was some distance from the village, and its isolated situation, once an undoubted attraction, now increased the difficulties of keeping a maid. Philippa was often asked by her mother to make life easier for Doris, and she was glad to help in the house, finding it calmed her nerves.

Mrs. Dale did the shopping.

She went off at 10 with the ration books and came back an hour later with the provisions in a wicker basket. She would also, when necessary, call on the verger or the organist.

The life of the big house throbbed gently on these autumn mornings. Once a week a charwoman from the other side of the orchard came to polish the smooth floors, and then the house smelt of beeswax, burning apple logs from Marc's study, and sweet, earthy smells from the magnificent garden which, because they could no longer afford a gardener, was becoming wild. Fortunately there were cabbages and Brussels sprouts and sufficient potatoes to keep them through the winter. Philippa herself had washed the potatoes and laid them in long rows in the attic, where they would be snug and dry and not lose their goodness like those which are thrown dirty in heaps. Potatoes were valuable, and city gangs with trucks had broken nocturnally into one of old Ganner's barns to rob him of two tons with which they had thundered off down the main road, hoping no doubt to be in town before daylight. The theft, carried out with speed and cleverness, had come as an unhappy reminder of the post-war wickedness prevailing in the cities.

The grandfather's clock in the hall was ticking gently.

Doris was upstairs. Bert, the milkman, in his white coat, walked up the path to the kitchen door.

"Good morning, miss," he said; "look what I've found."

He produced from his breast pocket a robin with a broken wing which he had just discovered in the road. He placed it on the kitchen table, but it fell and closed its sharp eyes. Bert looked at the robin and then at Philippa. He seemed to expect her to do something. His admiration for the rector's daughter caused him from time to time to leave her an extra pint of milk or a few eggs.

He had been married by her father in the Saxon church a few days before war started, but, having immediately been called up, was separated from his young wife and sent to sleep under canvas. In due course he went through the African campaign and the Italian beach-heads, where he alternately flirted with death and the too gracious Italian girls. Naively he used to write home: "We nearly had it. Then we marched in, and the girls were pleased to see us."

At home, the Americans were finding the English girls to their liking, and Bert's wife, having been left so long alone, took a lover. She spent her evenings in the pub, and when, after the war, Bert came back he found that his wife had her own way of living.

So Bert stayed at home, all by himself, listening to the radio. Philippa, in whom he confided day by day the details of his wretched existence, listened patiently. "We only see each other at closing time, when she comes back to sleep," he would explain. "But we don't talk. She sleeps on one side of the bed and I on the other."

He must have been the only milkman to be glad to come back to work after a day off. He kept his pay; his wife kept hers, but neither knew what the other earned. To have divorced her would have entailed paying alimony, and this he refused to do.

"I'll bring you a cage to-morrow," said Bert, reverting to the wounded robin. "When it's better, you can let it fly away, and I bet it comes back every day to the window for crumbs."

She felt sorry for both of them—the man and the robin. Bert added: "I'll leave you an extra pint for luck, miss."

She watched him swinging away down the path.

Her mother was late returning from the village. She had probably called on the verger's wife, who had bronchitis. But the verger, the rector, and the church were all symbols of a state of things which no longer existed. The church never had more than four or five worshippers on a Sunday morning, and in the evening there were fewer still. Marc Dale preached to empty pews, and sometimes Philippa thought he made use of these occasions to try out his prose.

The hamlet which the church had served for centuries had one day suddenly disappeared when acres of forest land were flooded to make an immense inland lake. A dozen thatched cottages and an adorable post office and general store joined to the Saxon church by a mile-long avenue of noble elms were, like Atlantis, engulfed by the waves. The reservoir was so large that people claimed that the entire British navy could manoeuvre on it, but people do so exaggerate. In stormy weather the wind howled over the watery surface. Fishermen, for it was a great privilege to fish in the lake, came back with queer stories. At certain times, so they said, one could peer over the side of a rowing boat and see the roofs of the lost hamlet.

The village where Mrs. Dale did her shopping was quite out of the parish, and it had grown so large during the last few years that it was really more like a little town. It had two churches of its own. Marc's interest was centred on the parish that used to be. Besides the rectory and the church

there was a manor house, now in rather a sad state of repair, where the squires lived in the old days. The deer park, with its once famous trout stream, had been turned by the Americans during the recent war into a research station, where cement huts and barbed wire pushed up against the Saxon church, elbowing it, as it were, into the main London road. The church, the rectory and the crumbling manor house were like valuable Old Masters, which it would have been better to take away in sections and place for safety in a museum, so that generations to come might learn what an English village looked like. The traffic in the road was shaking the stained glass in the church, splitting open the graves, shaking dust over the rector's mediæval books. This atmosphere sometimes unnerved Philippa for whom Bert, the milkman, was one of the few visitors from outside. Bert, who had said good-bye to love on the other side of the Apennines, did at least, on occasion, whistle the latest romance.

Philippa put the robin in a box with some cotton-wool, and went to see if her father had gone out.

His raincoat and ash stick were not there, but as the garden door was open she guessed he must have walked across the orchard to visit some family in the cottages. She wondered vaguely if she could find enough flowers to put in the vase on the piano in the sitting room. There would be plenty of chrysanthemums, but her father disliked them because chrysanthemums, like arum lilies, reminded him of funerals. There might be a few roses. She wondered if anybody would use the piano again—anybody in the family. Her mother had tried to teach her when she was small, but though she was painstaking she had no ear.

She went to fetch a duster and began to dust the long, shiny wood, and then suddenly the room seemed to fill with

the laughter of herself and of Gregory. She used to play hide and seek with him, and would have to pretend not to see him holding tightly to the piano leg with his chubby, dimpled arms.

A house with youth and lots of noise!

Gregory had been enormous fun when he was little, and how thrilled she had been when he came into the world. Philippa had been called by her mother to the side of the big bed, and she remembered exactly her mother's words as she showed her the sweet, kicking bundle of pink flesh: "Here is your baby brother, Philippa. I shall expect you to look after him a great deal."

That had been her first thrill—the prospect of having a doll which really moved. At least she would have something to bully and boss. When he was bigger she would be able to slap his face. She may have lost her temper with him sometimes, but she had his first smile, and though Mrs. Dale was jealous, the smile was presumably less due to any love on the part of Gregory than proof that Philippa, the resourceful sister, had discovered a new way to amuse him.

When he was old enough to understand, she read to him.

She read the various coloured fairy books and also disjointed pieces from books in her father's library. She ruled and charmed, but in their games Gregory began to take the lead and he translated her dreams into action. It was in their father's study, in the afternoon when he was out, that they liked to play. Gregory was the knight, and she was the lady with the tall conical headgear and gossamer veil. Her castle was the one depicted on the Flemish tapestry. The study was immense, full of mysterious corners. Their imaginations invented a mediæval setting of their own. Strange flowers, the colour of blood, like those on the tapestry, grew amongst luxuriant foliage at the bottom of the

battlements. A mediæval Philippa dreamt of love at her casement window. Her knight had gone to the wars, but soon he came back with the sun gleaming on his sword.

She loved him on these occasions, not in a sisterly way but devoured by passion and sentiment as in books. She admired his prowess. He fought his enemies furiously and at the head of his army assailed proud cities with flaming pikes and battering rams. Marc Dale's ash stick, thrust into the embers of the fire, those red-hot pieces under the logs, came down with a sizzling noise on the back of the wing-back chair. One could still see the result of this fine sortie. Gregory had been beaten and sent to bed on dry bread and water. Philippa, less incriminated, had been allowed to stay up, but at supper, after looking thoughtfully at her boiled egg, she asked:

"Has Gregory an egg?"

"You know he has not. Gregory is being punished."

"Then I shall not have mine."

She went up on tiptoe to see him. He was fast asleep, having eaten an entire loaf of newly-baked bread which the cook had brought to him secretly.

These were the good times. She had not doubted then that the lady in the tall mediæval headgear would always find her knight galloping up the road to lay his homage at her feet. She had even been impatient, wanting desperately to grow up, to undergo that mysterious change from child to woman. Now that this miracle had happened, romance was elusive. She could no longer conjure it up with a fretful cry of: "Gregory! Do hurry and rescue your lady from the dragon!"

Marc's study was still romantic because of the books. It had become smaller, a little shabbier; the flowers on the tapestry were still blood red. But the knight, when he

came down from Oxford, had become sullen and had problems of his own. The mediæval lady continued to look out from her casement, but the scene was less romantic. Instead of a gleaming horseman, sword raised high, there passed before Philippa's eyes the occasional traffic on the road to London.

Her birthdays now did not merely represent hope of things to come. They accentuated a gnawing fear that nothing at all might happen. Her mother had changed from the tender person to whom one ran for comfort after the childish accident, like falling on a stone in the garden and cutting one's knee, to the often incomprehensive stranger who would keep on repeating: "What is the matter with you to-day, my dear? You look out of sorts."

The big, rambling rectory was more of a prison than any mediæval castle. Philippa was imprisoned there by a sense of duty. The daughters of impecunious but erudite clergymen do not throw their bonnets over their shoulders. They do not complain openly when what, by rights, is theirs is given to the brother to establish his career.

But the loneliness, the feeling of being misunderstood—these things grow. There are no doctors to heal the malady of not finding the knight on the long, powdery road. The heart beats frantically and the body is consumed. The care-free young woman looks out of sorts.

When, as happened, Philippa watched the great waves of men and women hurrying out of the research station gates to go home in the evening, she envied their crowd spirit. The typists and the girl clerks were not, like her, taught to live in rarefied air. They spoke the same language, listened to the same radio programme, discussed the same film, believed what they read in the paper, and were not brought up on the *Concise English Dictionary*.

Mrs. Dale seemed to be in no hurry for her daughter to marry. Her un-interest in this matter was the reason for Philippa's bouts of ill humour. Mrs. Dale was the daughter of a don who had owned a large house the other side of Magdalen bridge. When Mrs. Dale was growing up, and when indeed she was a young woman, crowds of undergraduates came for tea or looked in after dinner. If one wished to be cruel, one might say that she had been married in spite of herself. More accurately, Marc had come into her life without any effort on her part. Scores had mildly flirted with her. She had remained cold and superior until Marc had appeared, so different, so much the counterpart of herself.

But this did not happen till she was twenty-eight—a very mature person. For this reason she continually countered Philippa's complaints with the remark that her daughter was still a baby. It did not occur to her that Philippa should even think of marrying until she was at least twenty-seven.

On the other hand, whenever Mrs. Dale spoke of Gregory she liked to stress his manhood. Her boy had become a man. This transformation flattered her immensely.

Philippa flicked the duster over the glossy part of the piano. Was she really to wait another six years?

It was the loneliness of the rectory that made her existence so intolerable. Like the church and the dilapidated manor house, the rectory was lonely in spite of the thousands of people working in the research station on the other side of the road. There were no undergraduates to drop in for tea or after dinner, as in her mother's youth at Oxford. Possibly, therefore, even in six years' time she would be no nearer to marriage than to-day. Logically she would be further, not nearer.

The sun had come out, and she looked up to see Marc coming home through the garden. He stopped to examine a tree, pushing his stick between the branches. A happy smile spread over his features, and he was obviously far away in the excitement of his thoughts.

The young tree that had momentarily halted his walk was probably transformed by his imagination into something quite different, like the windmills by Don Quixote. At this moment, he looked just like the hero of Cervantes' tale. His features were angular, his body unbelievably thin, and his hair, caught up by the wind, stood like a crested wave above his forehead.

She went out gaily to meet him. The earth smelt magnificent after the rain. He watched her taking great breaths of good air.

"Life's wonderful, isn't it?" he exclaimed affectionately. Then, catching her arm: "Let's go and see how many apple trees we can cut down for firewood this winter."

"There is one dead next to Ganner's cornfield," she said.

Marc Dale brushed the back of his hand against his forehead and answered:

"Tell me what you are thinking, what you are doing. I've been so busy with my book. I eat it, dream it, sleep it."

"Talking about books," she said, for the subject was burning her tongue, "last night I stole a batch of tiny ones from that shelf by the tapestry . . ."

She looked at him hesitatingly, but what was good about her father was the way he became immediately interested in everything.

"What, for instance?"

"Oh," she answered, reddening slightly and careful not

to mention the one that was really in her mind, " Balthasar Bekker and Bouchet? Sieur Bouchet?"

" Bouchet, but Sieur de Brocourt," her father corrected. " He lived in Poitiers in the sixteenth century. Funny being born at Poitiers. Funny, I mean, because at the start of this last war people on the Continent were all mad about interpreting the prophecies of Nostradamus, and Nostradamus was supposed to say that the war would end by the Germans being kicked out of France by a tremendous battle at Poitiers."

" Who was Nostradamus?"

" An astrologer who lived about the same time as Brocourt, a trifle earlier if anything."

" I haven't got to him yet," said Philippa. " Bouchet says that the best husbands have prominent noses."

Marc Dale automatically put his fingers to his nose, and then broke out in delicious laughter.

" Is that for me, young woman? He's right, quite right. Pliny says . . . Heavens! What funny bits of information you do pick up! But if you really want to read about witchcraft, you should have a look at my Jean Bodin, that nice piece of 16th century morocco tooled in fanfare. You'll find some hair-raising yarns in there."

He went on walking towards the field. Then glanced at her sideways, curiously.

" I do wish you had a more amusing time, Philippa. Perhaps when Gregory comes down . . ."

" No," she answered, " brothers are no good to sisters, not when they're grown up."

He pressed her arm, and said:

" Come on. Let's go and look at next year's firewood."

III

MRS. DALE, having returned from the village with six pounds of oranges and two lemons, announced at lunch her intention of making marmalade.

She had been obliged to use a stratagem with Mrs. Meddlesome, the greengrocer's wife, whose first winter consignment of citrus fruit had, for two days, perfumed the pavement in front of her shop. Twice, when Mrs. Dale had said to her: "Have your oranges arrived yet, Mrs. Meddlesome?" the lying woman had answered: "Not yet, Mrs. Dale." Mrs. Meddlesome and her husband were not church people. That was bad, of course. More important was the fact that Mrs. Dale grew so many vegetables and so many apples and pears that the rectory was not, in Mrs. Meddlesome's opinion, a good customer. Only those who took cabbages and sprouts all the year round had a mysterious bag of oranges thrust upon them. Yesterday, therefore, Mrs. Dale, following the second: "No, Mrs. Dale, I assure you I have no oranges," said casually: "And how is the potato situation, Mrs. Meddlesome?" "Oh, Mrs. Dale, we haven't seen a potato for over a month." "At the rectory," said Mrs. Dale, a trifle sententiously, "we have been very lucky. Allow me to bring you a few for the family to-morrow."

"And I didn't even have to ask for the oranges," said Mrs. Dale after lunch as she led her daughter into the

kitchen from which Doris had gone for her afternoon in the village. "They were waiting for me. So I thought we'd make four pounds to send to Gregory and keep two pounds for ourselves."

Philippa took the bread board and, choosing a sharp knife, began to shred the oranges. The sun, which had come out while she and her father had been in the orchard, was now hidden behind heavy clouds, and the kitchen was the warmest place in the house. Mrs. Dale was in a specially good temper, not only on account of the oranges but because of something even more gratifying. That morning the postman had brought a large, untidy parcel from Oxford in which Gregory had packed his white sweater, a pair of pants and a collection of socks with enormous holes.

"We're training him," said Mrs. Dale. "I can't tell you what I felt like when I discovered he just threw away his socks when the holes were too large. I wrote him the sweetest letter imploring him to send them back, but I have come to the conclusion he only reads the first two lines of what I write. Your father was for putting a phrase half-way through to say: "If you get this far, write and tell us, and we'll send you ten shillings." But I sent him the ten shillings quite openly, so that he should have enough to cover the postage."

She laughed happily, squeezing the woollen treasures:

"I suppose it's my fault for thinking he could still be interested in all the unimportant things I write to him. My news has become so very dull for a grown man—the robins in the garden and the tiles which fall off the church roof. It does seem silly, doesn't it? But I've got his socks. I haven't felt so busy since the beginning of the term."

She put the socks back in the brown paper and filled the kettle.

Gregory had read her last letter. Gregory had sent his woollens back. They were going to make marmalade for Gregory. These things stood out pleasantly in her mind. What often made her miserable was the fear that soon she might not be useful any more to him. Now, in her joy, she felt the need of bringing everybody under her wing, and she said to Philippa:

"It's so nice in the kitchen. Go and ask your father to have tea here. I'm sure his fire is out."

She added:

"Oh, and look! The milkman has left us an extra pint of milk. What a lovely afternoon!"

Marc Dale was also in a happy mood. Philippa almost felt as if they shared a secret because of the words they had exchanged on their way between the garden and the orchard. He came in with a sheaf of newspapers and sat down in the big brown chair by the kitchen table.

She took the tea which the people from the Grange had sent her father from Montreal and which they kept for rather special occasions. It was called "Tender Leaf," and was in a bright red package, and tasted much better than the Government mixture which left oily brown marks on the cups. Philippa also, without quite knowing why, put out the light blue service they kept to honour any visiting dons, but Mrs. Dale always used a cup of egg-shell china with a moss rose on it which had been Gregory's when he had scarlet fever, and to which she was now much attached.

"Oh, and Marc!" exclaimed Mrs. Dale, "Gregory wants you to send him the Lexicon—the big, fat one."

"It's a bit heavy for the post," objected Marc.

"There's not the slightest reason to send it by the post," answered Mrs. Dale. "Philippa will go to the Fairchilds

to-morrow and order a packing case large enough to take the marmalade, the book, and his clothes, and Johnny will take it in his van when next he goes to Oxford."

Johnny Fairchild had played with Gregory and Philippa when they were children. He was a few months older than Philippa, light haired with strong limbs and blue eyes. He was only just back from the Army and worked in the carpenters' shop just outside the village.

"I'll go in the morning," said Philippa.

She was anxious to discover if his adventures in the Far East had changed him. When, as a little boy on Saturday afternoons, he came to play in the garden, he was always the 'explorer' escaping through raspberry bushes from the 'natives.' His father, Abe, was a devout man who kept the church in good repair, seldom sending in the bill. If he had been more astute, the war might have made him rich, for he had obtained several of the early contracts for erecting the giant research station which was now pushing the Saxon church and its graveyard into the main road. An ironical person might have said that the rector's best friend was his natural enemy.

Marc Dale put down *The Times* and took out of a yellow band the Paris *Figaro* which he sometimes read for its reports on lectures at the Sorbonne. Philippa, having finished slicing her oranges, placed a clean napkin over the half-full pudding basin to let them soak overnight. She had her own ways for obtaining sugar which she stored away carefully. When her mother, who objected to buying more than the law allowed, came upon it, she would exclaim in genuine surprise: "Philippa, my darling, just look what I've found!"

"Didn't you tell me you had been reading Balthasar Bekker?" asked Marc Dale, turning to his daughter.

"Why, yes . . ." she answered uncertainly, not liking to discuss this matter in her mother's presence. Marc went on.

"Did you see the drawings of the diviners—those lace-collared 17th century Dutchmen holding hazel nut sticks in front of them, searching for water or minerals? Tell me what you think of this gentleman from Amiens who, using a whale bone in preference to a hazel stick, has tracked down the alleged murderer of M. George Cauhet, wealthy cattle merchant. . . ."

"Come, Marc," said his wife. "Why do you fill the child's mind with things that you know are not true?"

"She's old enough to read the papers," answered Marc. "The sorcerer, according to the *Figaro*, was taken to the place of the crime where, having picked up a bullet still full of the vibrations of the assassin, he allowed his magic whalebone to lead him directly to the home of the electrician Gaston B. . . ."

"Undoubtedly a village vendetta," said Mrs. Dale.

"Not so fast," laughed her husband. "The *Figaro* adds that the sorcerer came from a different part of France, and knew nobody connected with the crime."

"What nonsense," said Mrs. Dale. "It would never happen in England."

"Have you forgotten the black mass in Devonshire, my dear?"

"That's different."

"Why different?"

"I mean the black mass was the work of a madman, or at least I hope so, whereas these foreigners appear to believe in their sorcerer."

"The police are careful not to call him a sorcerer. They have a modern name—a radiogoniometrist, a

man who replaces Hertzian waves by human waves."

"Oh, Marc, I sometimes think I was wrong to marry a historian, especially a sixteenth century historian. You'd do far better to worry about what's of your own time and under your nose, like drinking your tea while it's hot."

"One doesn't need to be a historian to fail to see what's in front of one's nose . . ." began Philippa.

"Not to see what, my lamb?" asked Mrs. Dale gently, quite forgetting her argument. "Philippa, my pet, you who are so frightfully clever at washing delicate things, could you . . . could you possibly wash Gregory's big woolly sweater, the one I made him, and dry it ever so carefully so that the colours don't run?"

"Of course," said Philippa, "just as soon as I've cleared the table."

Philippa's remark, addressed to her mother, about some people seeing nothing, had not been lost on Marc Dale who now watched his daughter moving gracefully about the kitchen. He was sufficiently perceptive to realise that what she had just said was due to the same state of mind which had prompted her remarks in the garden, and while trying to puzzle out what exactly was wrong, he noticed as if he were examining her intently for the first time, that she had grown slender, that she had a graceful neck, and that her expression was wilful.

He had always assumed that it was wise to leave a daughter's education entirely to the mother. He was disconcerted, when she broke into his library, by the speed with which she assimilated a great diversity of knowledge, and the unorthodox criticisms she made. Gregory learnt slower, but was more reliable and Marc knew in advance the way he would react. Philippa's emotions were vivid and intense. She was too sensitive to have the mind of a

man, but too intelligent to be merely a picturesque help in the house. If only she could be more rational, more logical. He had been looking at her fixedly for a while, and said suddenly:

"Surely you've lengthened your skirt, Philippa?"

That was one of the things which had been puzzling him and that he could not name. Mrs. Dale glanced over her shoulder from the cupboard where she had been looking for marmalade jars with screw-on tops, and considering her daughter, said:

"Why, so you have, my dear. Is that what they call the *New Look*?"

Philippa blushed. She objected to her mother's sneers against the little vanities that made life amusing. She was beginning to realise she was vain. Vain because of her looks. Vain by reason of the slight contempt she felt towards people in general. But Marc said, turning to his wife:

"When I was courting you, Margaret, after the first world war, skirts were travelling, if I remember rightly, in the opposite direction, upwards instead of downwards. You said it was because the world had become too fast moving since Victorian days for you to remain feminine. Has it slowed down since then?"

He chuckled, waiting for his wife to make some affectionate but silly remark. She said:

"I am sure it was more sensible, my dear."

Marc repeated mentally the wish he had expressed earlier that his daughter might have a more amusing life, and said, as a challenge rather than as a statement of fact:

"After the first war, the world was young—the motor car was young, the aeroplane was young, the cinema was young, jazz was young, and the radio was so new that

broadcasting was a scarcely audible infant. Do you remember, Margaret, when we went to Paris by air for our honeymoon? The air company was only a few weeks old. What an exciting adventure!"

Mrs. Dale smiled. Her arms were full of jam jars. She said good-naturedly, because there was joy in her heart:

" Things have made such progress since then. Gregory talks about flying faster than sound. How quick would that be?"

" It doesn't matter how fast it would be," said Marc. " Flying for the ordinary person has become just a bore, motoring when the Government doesn't forbid it altogether is a humdrum family business; dancing, so my colleagues at Oxford tell me, has gone quite out of fashion; and the radio has become simply a method for killing time like the quiz and the crossword puzzle."

Philippa was gently squeezing her brother's sweater through tepid, soapy water. While listening with a smile to her father, she had been intent on seeing if the colours ran. When she had satisfied herself that they were fast, she put a drop of vinegar in the rinse, and said:

" We can't judge here. We might as well be on a bit of sand with the sea rising all round. According to the newspapers, gunmen fire at each other in the street, and Black Market racketeers run gold across the Channel. If I were a man I'd go and see for myself."

" Well, I think it's a good thing you're not a man," said Mrs. Dale, closing her cupboard.

Marc rose, and lighting his pipe from the gas ring, added:

" You remind me of the little white goat who thought that the country beyond her tether was so very exciting . . ."

" . . . that she broke loose one night and was eaten by the wolf," said Philippa, laughing. " Is that it?"

She took Gregory's sweater out of the clear water, and dried it gently in a spongy towel. Her father smiled at her knowingly before returning to his study. He was very sweet this evening, and it was obvious that he was anxious to help, though in an abstract way.

Mrs. Dale wondered if the study fire was out, and would have sent Philippa to report if Philippa had not been making such a good job of Gregory's sweater. She would go herself.

" Oh, and Marc," she exclaimed as she followed him, " you must give me the Lexicon. I'm going to get everything ready!"

Philippa laid the damp sweater against the towel on the kitchen table, puffed out the arms, and pinched the ribs to make them dry the right way. The garment began to look almost alive. There was something aggressive and virile about it.

She drew herself up and put her hand to her cheeks as if indisposed by the gentle warmth of the kitchen. Marc had been nice to notice her skirt. She would wear it to-morrow when she went down to the village. In a way it was quite exciting that Johnny Fairchild was back.

IV

MRS. DALE, wearing gardening gloves and a poke hat, stood in the hall surrounded by blue and pink autumn daisies which she had spent the last hour gathering at the bottom of the orchard. She had suddenly decided to spend the rest of the day decorating the church for the harvest festival.

"I wish you would go across to Prudence and ask her to come and give me a hand on her way home," she exclaimed rather petulantly to her daughter. "She's so good with the higher bits."

"Wouldn't you rather I helped?" offered Philippa.

"Why 'rather'?" answered Mrs. Dale. "You can *both* help, but first you must persuade Johnny about the box. Gregory will be in a hurry to have his things."

Philippa had finished the marmalade before lunch and the six pots now stood lined up against the dresser, warm, and sticky, and hermetically sealed. The sweater was ironed, and wrapped up in tissue paper, and there were several bars of chocolate, and a bag of butter-scotch representing the family's sweet ration for the current month. Philippa was by now just as anxious as her mother to put all sorts of pleasant surprises in the packing case she was going to order. Her concern was to think out a method to prevent the Lexicon from bumping up against the marmalade jars.

The hall was covered in autumn daisies whose leaves and

graceful flowers were heavy with the rain which had come down all the morning. Now it had ceased but the sky was full of cloud. Philippa tightened a transparent raincoat over her costume, and set off to give her mother's message to Prudence at the girls' school.

She pushed open the big green gate leading into the muddy path which divided the rectory from the field belonging to the Manor House. A very old walnut tree grew in the middle of the field. In summer the three or four young horses put here used to congregate under the tree. Now that the weather was cool they gravely ambled towards the holly hedge over which they looked with big, interested eyes at the rare pedestrians who kept well in to the prickly leaves because of the traffic which emerged dangerously from a bend in the road.

Anybody could see that this inadequate highway had been born out of an old English country road where the squire would ride with his folk and his hounds, and where once a day, perhaps, one would hear the sound of the stage coach. Generations of squires had lived in the long Dutch-looking house where just now the Virginia creeper stretched into copper tentacles half way up the high narrow red-brick chimney stacks. The family had come to an end. The name of Hallendyce on bronze plaques was attached to the mediæval walls on either side of the altar. The family was buried in vaults over which one knelt to receive Holy Communion. Flags captured in 18th century battles hung dark and frayed from the eternal dimness above the beautiful font. A Hallendyce was killed in the Peninsular wars, another was wounded at Waterloo. Philippa during inattentive moments at church had learnt all about them—when they had come into the world and when they had left it, their deeds of valour, and the names

of their dearly beloved wives—names faintly reminiscent of Gainsborough hats and satin gowns, names like Iris and Sylvia, Daphne and Euphemia.

The land on both sides of the road had belonged to them. The living had been theirs to dispose of and on Sundays the rector would always have come to dine and drink a glass of port. The river had been full of fish and there were partridges.

The field with the walnut tree and the four horses was the only land left to the Manor House. The research station employed three thousand people who went home at night on bicycles or in six-wheeled coaches.

If Marc Dale had been less engrossed in the writing of his books, he might have felt more bitterly the squeezing out of his church, his rectory and even the few remaining people in his parish by the immense community, working, feeding, and occasionally seeking its recreation behind barbed wire. But Marc Dale being reasonable, perhaps too reasonable, accepted the tragedy of his parish as part of a trend which had been going on for some time. The English countryside was suffering from modern inventions and an unwillingness of people to go to church. He deplored this wind of atheism without knowing how to counter it. Soon the owners of the research station would persuade the university authorities to sell both church and rectory to widen the road which was dangerous for their lorries.

At the church there were christenings and weddings, and the grass round it was still dug up to receive some new parishioner into eternal rest. Prudence who taught in the girls' school and whom Philippa was on the way to see, had married earlier in the year a young man in the catering department of the research station. Many people from

the research station had attended the wedding. This was the first time most of them had ever been in the church and they were surprised to think they had passed it every day without noticing even that it was there. A month later Prudence lost her mother and a grave was dug between the yew tree and the tall white flagpole which Marc Dale had put up during the war as a tribute to Winston Churchill.

The church which had buried the mother, was unable to find anywhere for the young people to live. Fortunately Prudence had the idea of buying a caravan which they wheeled to a ploughed field adjoining the rectory. The river ran at the bottom of the field and Prudence knelt under the willow trees to do the washing. They both claimed that their home was very snug. At any rate they were alone. They had a house and virtually two acres of land!

Philippa walked quickly past the holly hedge over which the horses stretched their friendly heads. They followed her as far as the tall brick wall against which on the sunny side, the Hallendyce family had grown peaches and pears.

She looked back at the four animals, surprised once again, to find them so affectionate, so apparently anxious for human company. The rectory looked pretty from here, and so did the outhouse with its black walls and red tiles where her father kept logs and gardening tools. Their property was divided from the road by a high wall like the one belonging to the Manor House garden but in which there was a red letter box—the only one this side of the village.

From round the bend came a little bunch of schoolgirls wearing red pixie hoods and woollen gloves. One or two had pigtails with bright ribbons. Kept dry by their tall

rubber boots they waded into the largest puddles, darting into the middle of the road in spite of the traffic and all together wishing Philippa a shrill good afternoon.

Iron gates had once led into the Manor House, but only the posterns were left. Brambles grew untidily on either side of the courtyard, now full of mud except in the centre where an overturned wheelbarrow rested on an island of sand. Fifty yards from the entrance one could see the house—long, elegant, very harmonious with its façade of white stucco, its green windows and doors, the white jasmine growing under the creaking metal lamp, the slate roof shining with rain drops, and the tall red chimney choked with Virginia creeper.

Philippa ran quickly across the road and up the white steps into the school where she found Prudence wiping the afternoon's lesson off the blackboard. The warm atmosphere of the classroom, and her companion's quick movements and obvious enjoyment of her work, made Philippa curiously jealous. She called out:

"Prudy! You are wanted to decorate the church."

Prudence dropped the duster and shook the chalk from her hands. She had a quiet admiration for Philippa's mother which made her obey Mrs. Dale's sometimes unreasonable requests with an admirable promptitude. She stepped down from the rostrum and answered.

"Bill will be back early this evening, and I haven't even made the bed."

"You would have time first," answered Philippa. "We could walk together as far as the caravan. I am going to the Fairchilds."

Prudence had arrived from Coventry at the beginning of the war. She worked very hard to make ends meet and was already suffering from the illness which had killed her

mother, but in Philippa's eyes, the young school teacher enjoyed the glory of being married and having a home of her own.

The blue and cream caravan with its bright chintz curtains and silver door knocker stood in the driest part of the field, not far from the river. Prudence took the key proudly from her bag, and said apologetically:

"I am afraid you will think me very untidy."

The caravan was divided into three parts—a living-room into which one entered immediately, a kitchen with a stove and a sink, and a bedroom only just large enough for the bed, a narrow table and a wicker chair.

In the first room a candle stood in the neck of a bottle covered with pearly wax as if the wind had howled through the window cracks whilst the young couple had played cards the night before. There was an ash tray with cigarette stubs, many stained with Prudence's lipstick. Certainly, thought Philippa, they must have played cards and talked until past midnight. They were alone, alone with their love, a law to themselves, on the edge of this field where the river, swollen by the rains, lapped over the roots of the willows. They could shout and quarrel and kiss without any living thing seeing them or overhearing them except the owl which lived in the tree in the rectory garden and which at night made those eerie sounds which so often kept Philippa awake. The sheets lay crumpled at the foot of the bed. The view of the river through the window gave one the impression of being in a monkey boat tied up to the bank. With a little pretending one could certainly make the most wonderful journeys. Bill had kicked his slippers off in a hurry. Another candle had dribbled its wax. Philippa, accustomed to the immense old-fashioned spaciousness of the rectory, caught herself

blushing at the intimacy of this tiny home. Prudence was already remaking the bed with a few violent turns of her wrists. Bill's pyjamas fell on the mat. Philippa put down her bag and helped her companion. As they worked, Prudence said.

"Do you suppose old Ganner will mind if we steal a little piece, say about as large as a pocket handkerchief, of his field for a garden? Look! We've already staked it out with pegs and a ball of string. We hope to grow vegetables in the middle and flowers along the border. Lots of people who live in real houses would give anything to grow their own food."

"Grow your own food!" exclaimed Philippa. "Do you really suppose . . .?" But she added. "Well, I don't see why you shouldn't, and it will be grand fun! Daddy can supply you with everything you need—seeds and plants, I mean, and you can borrow his tools."

The caravan was ready for Bill now. He would find everything perfectly tidy when he came home. Prudence gave a last look round before locking the front door, and while waiting for her friend walked down to the river where Bill had built a tiny stage where his wife could kneel and wash the linen in the quick-running water. This was the same river which curled round the bottom of the rectory orchard—the orchard where Philippa so seldom went now since Gregory was no longer at home. Gregory! She simply must go and order his packing case. Besides, Mrs. Dale would be wondering what had happened to Prudence.

"See you later, Prudy!" she exclaimed, and running lightly along the bank rejoined the main road fifty yards beyond the stone bridge. Prudence, more slowly, made her way by the short cut, towards the church. The yew

and the cedar and the dark greens of the churchyard made her shudder. She remembered from time to time, with a nasty shock, that her mother was in the cold, damp earth under the rain and the wind. Only Bill, and the cards and the big brown teapot, prevented her from thinking more often about it.

Philippa allowed her imagination to transform Johnny Fairchild from the rather overgrown schoolboy she had last seen before the war to the fair young man who must certainly be strengthened and bronzed by six years in the East. She was not sure why she felt this little thrill at meeting him again. For years she had not given him a thought and now she was quite concerned about the impression she would make.

Abe Fairchild's place was at the bottom of a cul-de-sac just before one reached the village. There were some big wooden doors and a courtyard. The carpenters' shop was in a long shed attached to a sedate, mid-Victorian brick house which served the double purpose of builders' office and home for the Fairchild family, Abe Fairchild, Mrs. Fairchild and Johnny.

When she entered the courtyard she heard laughter from inside the carpenters' shed. It was always a busy place with half a dozen carpenters and generally an apprentice or two.

She jumped over the rail on which rolled the steel doors. The laughter came from the far end of the shop beyond a pile of window frames and cupboards. There was a smell of new wood and sawdust. She quickened her step, drawn forward by a desire to join in whatever joke was going on. Nobody could guess how much she missed the presence of young people at the rectory.

Suddenly she heard distinctly through the merriment a

low, muffled cry, a cry of fear, the sort of cry that a child or an animal might let out when suddenly faced with danger. A creepy feeling travelled down her spine. She stopped unbravely, then overcoming her nerves, hurried forward past unfinished objects which blocked her view. The laughter started again, louder than before, and reaching the end of the hangar, she saw half a dozen men sitting on a long box. Just behind them stood a young man who, looking up, saw her, and turning to his men, said quickly:

"Take the lid off now. The kid has had enough."

The men stopped laughing. Philippa's arrival had caused something to go wrong. They rose but in such a way as to shield from view what they were doing. From the box came fainter, stifled cries, more heart-rending. Fists pounded to let in air.

Philippa elbowed her way nearer; then felt faint. The box was a newly made coffin from which came no further sound.

Johnny Fairchild came forward. He looked just as she had expected him to look—slim, bronzed, fair, but at that moment he appeared to her as something evil, and with her head full of sorcery from the books in her father's library, she imagined she had broken in on some pagan ceremony, some black mass. She began to attack him furiously, but he, without trying to defend himself, bent over the coffin, wrenching away with a hammer a loosely driven tack. The lid fell on the floor. Curiously she held her breath and looked. A youth of about fourteen, from whom all colour had gone, lay perfectly still with his arms pinioned against the white satin lining of the coffin.

"He's fainted," said a man quietly. "Get a glass of water!"

They pulled him out, shook him by the shoulders, threw some water over his face, and managed to make him stand up by the bench. He was rather pretty of features, delicate, pathetic, as he opened his eyes slowly, and said.

"I do feel bad."

"That's all right," said the foreman. "It ain't nothing, really. You're a man now."

"It was black inside," said the boy. "That's what got me—the black. I've never seen black like that before. And me arms—there was no room for me arms to move. The lid came down so far . . ."

He tried unsuccessfully to describe his first fear of death. Philippa knelt in front of him, pushing his hair back from his forehead.

"Why did they do this to you?"

"He's all right," said Johnny quickly, trying to explain. "After the tea break he'll have forgotten all about it. He'll be laughing with the boys."

"That's as Mr. Fairchild says, Miss," put in the foreman. "We wouldn't have let him come to any harm."

"You wouldn't have let him come to any harm!" echoed Philippa, whose voice struck harshly against the steel walls of the shed.

The foreman's words sounded ironical, and she went on. "In another moment the child would have been smothered."

The boy whimpered.

"Come, Philippa . . ." began Johnny. Then faced with her unreceptiveness. "Come, Miss Dale. . . . Let me explain. . . ."

"There is nothing to explain!" Turning swiftly, she ran out of the shed.

Wherever she looked, across the darkened fields or into

the black hedges, she saw the boy with his bloodless face, his arms limp against the white satin.

There were lights in the church but she was afraid to go in, and hurrying through the rectory gate, she went straight to her room to be alone with her indignation. When an hour or so later the gong sounded for dinner, she arrived in the dining-room looking so strange that her mother exclaimed:

"My dear, you *do* look dishevelled. Have you been fighting somebody?"

Mrs. Dale laughed, pleased with her joke.

"Did you order the packing case?"

"No, mother."

"No? Didn't you go to Fairchilds?"

"Yes, but. . . ."

She hated her mother for pressing these indiscreet questions. She did not want to be made to talk about the thing devouring her mind.

But Mrs. Dale was anxious about the marmalade and the socks.

"Well, speak up, child!"

"About what?" asked Philippa, jerkily, emerging from her thoughts.

"About Gregory's packing case, silly! What has come over you?"

"The carpenters' shop was closed. I'll go to-morrow."

"It never closes till six."

Marc, who sensed a family quarrel, said helpfully.

"I *have* known it to close early, my dear."

He looked understandingly at Philippa, then turning to his wife.

"Tell me about the decorations. I hear Prudence was there."

Philippa tried in the stillness of the night to find an answer to her problems. Why had Johnny Fairchild and his companions tried to murder the boy? No, they were not murderers. They were decent men. The foreman was married and had two little girls in Prudy's class. And yet, continued Philippa, the boy was hysterical and his cries which had caused that horrible feeling down her spine were so real that no decent person could have heard them and remained, like Johnny Fairchild, like the foreman, waiting for the silence of suffocation.

She had made a careful search for the book which her father had spoken about the previous morning—*The Demonology of Sorcerers* by Jean Bodin, magistrate in Angers during the middle of the 16th century, and now it lay carefully hidden under her pillow. The red binding was certainly the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and as soon as she had settled carefully between the sheets she brought it out and passed her hands amorously over the leather with its magnificent tooling in gold. Though the sheets were slightly browned, the large type was beautifully clear and one could read it easily. It was published by Jacques du Puys à la Samaritaine in 1582 and had a drawing of a well with angels looking down it, the publisher's trade sign, inspired by his name.

Each page had two narrow red lines or rules dividing the type from the margins and in these there were references, often in Greek or Latin, as in a Bible. The magistrate recalled the sentence of death passed in his presence on the last day of April 1578 against the sorceress Jeanne Harvillier, a native of Compiègne, accused of the murder of beasts and men. Jeanne said that when she was twelve, her mother, having promised her to the Devil from birth, brought her into his presence—a tall, dark man, dressed in

black cloth, wearing spurs and jack boots, and having a sword at his side. She was his, in the full sense of the word, from that first meeting, and henceforward whenever she called him, he would arrive and leave his horse at the door, invisible to anyone but her. In fact though he often slipped into her bed at night, her husband never noticed anything unusual.

One day for some reason which the magistrate neglected to say, Jeanne's daughter was beaten by a man against whom the sorceress planned revenge. The Devil gave her a powder which he told her to spread on the ground over which the man was to pass, but unfortunately another man against whom she wished no ill passed that way first and was immediately struck with a dreadful pain in the heart. She took pity on him, and having hidden him in a barn, called up the Devil, and implored him to produce a remedy, but the Devil refused, and the sick man died. For her crime she was sentenced to be burnt at the stake.

Before her death, Jeanne admitted that she was often transported by the Devil to assemblies at which he presided. Upon reading these words Philippa pictured him surrounded by his henchmen and shuddered. She read on more quickly. These assemblies were discussed in the light of many different cases, the most famous of which, according to the author, was that of the witch of Loches 'which happened only the other day.' The witch of Loches so often left her bed in the middle of the night that her husband became suspicious, and wanted to know where she went. At first she said it was to the end of the passage. Then she pretended to do the washing with her neighbour. But the husband, who 'had a sinister opinion of her lies,' said that unless she told him the truth he would kill her.

So she told him she attended assemblies presided over

by the Devil, and she suggested he should cover his body with grease and come with her. After mumbling a few words they were transported in a moment from Loches to the landes of Bordeaux which were at least fifteen days' journey away.

Now what happened exactly in these assemblies?

"In the centre of some crossroads a large black he-goat was talking to the people as if he had been human. Everybody danced round him after which each person in turn placed a lighted candle under his tail. The goat went up in flames and the worshippers collected handfuls of cinders which had the power of killing bulls, cows, and horses belonging to one's enemy, and even, in special cases, one's neighbour himself."

The next morning when Philippa came down to breakfast, her parents had almost finished.

"It's unusual for you to be so late," said Mrs. Dale, trying to repress a slight feeling of annoyance that her daughter could not be on time. "I hope you're not ill?"

"No, mother. I'm quite well."

"There's a letter for you. It looks very dull. Merely something local, I'm afraid."

"You should have opened it," said Philippa tersely.

It was aggravating that every time she received a letter her mother must speculate on the contents. She ripped open the envelope imagining, for some reason, that it was a bill for a dress she had sent to the cleaner. Instead of that she unfolded a sheet filled in an unknown hand.

"Who has sent me his life story?" she exclaimed, puzzled.

She saw the signature and blushed violently.

She looked up, furious that her mother should have

noticed her confusion. Even Marc had been tempted from his perusal of *The Times* by her exclamation, and was now wondering what to make of it.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Dale.

"It's nothing," she answered angrily. "Nothing important."

She pushed the letter under her plate, and Marc said:

"My dear Margaret, this Government is going from worse to worse. You really should read the leader in *The Times*."

There was a corner in the garden where Philippa went when she wanted to be alone. At the end of the lawn under a high elm whose branches stretched over the red brick wall dividing the rectory from the roaring traffic of the road, was an inscription, saying:

*This tree was planted by Lt. Col. Charles
Hallendyce who fought in the Battle of
Waterloo. Preserve it for his sake.*

In those days the rector was also a Hallendyce, a young brother of the one who fought at Waterloo. How right had they been, these two brothers, to plant this big elm, and who was the philosopher who said that to plant a tree was to perform a good deed?

The tree however would soon have to come down like everything else in this unhappy hamlet for the inside was hollow. Meanwhile it made a hiding place for Philippa. She and Gregory had hidden here a hundred times when they were little. She felt closer to him in these childhood places.

Still hot in the cheeks and furiously angry, she unfolded the letter from Johnny Fairchild, and read as follows.

" My dear Philippa Dale,

" I suppose you won't read this letter, but I want you to know you're very silly. In almost all trades, the very old ones, I mean, which date from the beginning of time, there's a system of initiation for the kids who come along as apprentices. The carpenter's trade is as old as any, and in spite of the unions we are still allowed to take apprentices. Most people do not realise that a very important part of a carpenter's work is the making of coffins. We make two or three a week, mostly of elm or oak. On an average they each take six hours to make. If there is to be a cremation we use poplar covered with purple material, because in the heat of the oven. . . . Perhaps there is no need to go into these details.

" The carpenter is often the builder and undertaker. These three trades are closely linked. The coffin therefore is loaded in a black van after dark and taken to the house where the carpenters put the dead person in the box they have made for him. They come back in due course to screw on the lid, and often act as bearers. So you see our trade is not all making windows and doors. Every one of the men in my father's shop has been initiated as most sailors, I take it, are still ducked when they first cross the Line. This is what happened yesterday. Young Bert, aged fifteen, but I admit rather slight and effeminate for his age, was assisting our foreman to make a coffin of elm. Actually he was holding it on the stool while the white satin was being tacked inside. Everybody in the shop except the kid, knew that the initiation was to take place. The foreman said to him: ' Bert, this coffin is for a boy just about your size. Pop in and see if it will fit.' Bert didn't like the idea but he was afraid to be laughed at by the men, so he climbed in. That's where they slammed on

the lid and sat on poor Bert. Bert was right when he said it was the darkness that gets one. But he's a man now. He'll do the same thing to other kids as long as they make coffins of wood.

"To-morrow you will find he's forgotten all about it. When a youngster leaves his saw in a piece of timber to go to lunch, the others come along and pour glue over the handle. That teaches him to snap out of his bad habits.

"I think you look awful nice grown up, and you might come along to say why you wanted me.

Yours,

Johnny Fairchild."

V

ALL day there had been a sense of unrest in the house. Mrs. Dale did not refer again to the contents of the letter but she was annoyed that Philippa was moody and, in this particular case, definitely secretive. Her daughter's antagonism hurt her; she floundered, sulked, was angry with herself for not understanding, and in these moments of vexation became sarcastic in a stupid, awkward manner so that the gulf widened instead of being bridged.

Philippa, left to herself, considering her mother uninterested in her and selfish, went off to the building yard for she was no longer able to delay ordering the packing case for Gregory, but instead of making for the carpenters' shop, she went to the office to give her instructions to a clerk. All the time she spoke to him, she felt Johnny's presence mysteriously. The more she hated him, the more she would have liked to see him again, but when her business was finished, she hurried out of the office without even looking round.

After supper while they were all sitting by the fire in Marc's study, she remained savagely silent. Everything that her parents said put her nerves on edge. She took a book and started to read, strangely put out by the sound of her mother's knitting needles. Only the books in her father's library could give her any feeling of contentment.

Into this strained atmosphere broke the sound of the

telephone which Marc went to answer. When he came back from the hall, Philippa was struck by the sudden tiredness of his features. His eyes were sunk and all the muscles of his face seemed to have lost their vigour. She regretted not having listened more carefully to what he had said to his caller.

"Who was it, my dear?" asked Mrs. Dale who had not yet realised that anything was wrong.

Her natural tone of voice seemed appallingly out of place in the suddenly changed atmosphere. She must have noticed it herself for she exclaimed.

"Something is wrong. Yes, I know there's something wrong. Tell me quickly. Is Gregory ill?"

Only one thing could make her heart beat like this, and that was the fear of bad news about Gregory. Her cry was so poignant that it seemed to rob Marc of all that was left of his courage. He just managed to whisper.

"Yes, he's ill. I must go. But it will be nothing."

She had flown to him and was clawing at the lapels of his jacket as if she could lay naked the secret in his heart.

"I want to know," she said. "I must know . . . everything."

"It came as such a shock," answered Marc. "It was difficult to catch the details. Gregory has meningitis. He's in hospital. But I didn't pay sufficient attention to the other things the doctor told me. I mean that I kept on thinking that he's ill and that I must go. I must get to the station somehow but there's no petrol in the car. We're not supposed to use it any more."

Mrs. Dale caught hold of the back of a chair to prevent herself from fainting, and then answered with flushed cheeks. "If only it were not so late we could have gone

across to the research station. They have all the cars they want."

"What about old Ganner?" queried Marc, trying to find a timetable. "He would run me into town."

"Ganner will be at the Rose and Crown playing darts," put in Philippa, trying to think hard. "There's only one person who would really be of any use . . . who would go out of his way, I mean, but. . . ."

They both looked at her. She was young. Her mind was more supple, and could recover quicker from this cataclysm than theirs.

"Who?" they queried.

She ran into the hall and feverishly turned the leaves of the directory.

"Who?" they repeated.

"Johnny Fairchild," she answered. "He'd drive you through the night if it was necessary."

"Yes," answered Marc, "I think he would. Johnny's a fine boy. He likes us. Margaret, my dear go and put a few things in my brown bag. I'll telephone you as soon as I have seen Gregory. To-night, I hope. Oh, God, help Gregory. He mustn't die. Is there any answer, Philippa?"

"It's ringing," she said. . . . "Oh, Johnny, it's Philippa Dale. Listen. We're in trouble. Gregory is frightfully ill, and father doesn't know how to get to Oxford at this time of night."

The answer came clearly, efficiently over the wire.

"Don't worry. Leave it to me. I'll be right round with the car."

"Oh, Johnny, thanks. Thank you a million times. I knew you would."

She was more moved than she should have been by the

sound of his voice. Indeed her confusion was so violent that a guilty redness coloured her cheeks. But it quickly passed. Gregory's illness overcame all other thoughts and she was now only too anxious to make up for her sulkiness earlier in the evening, and to do everything she could to help her parents.

Marc in his deep disarray, did not know how to express adequately his gratitude for Johnny's offer. He kept on saying what good friends of the rectory the Fairchilds had always been, and what a magnificent thing it was to have friends like that. They would have plenty of petrol because they were builders, and for a lad like Johnny who had been so resourceful in Burma, it would be nothing to run the gantlet of a few inquisitive policemen. Mrs. Dale, pathetically anxious and bewildered, packed her husband's pyjamas and his razor. The house was suddenly all noise and energy, and everybody spoke louder than usual.

Twenty minutes later Johnny arrived.

He stood hesitatingly on the gravel path which led from the front door past the walnut tree field to the main road. He was wearing an officer's greatcoat and a muffler but no hat, and seemed to be looking for the right words. Philippa was in the light of the hall, Marc was coming down the staircase with his bag.

"You got my letter?" he queried quickly.

She nodded. Her hatred was singularly ineffective.

"Thanks for sending for me," he added. "I hope it won't turn out to be serious."

They all went out into the main road and when Marc was safely in the car, his wife bent over to kiss him and then buried her face in his overcoat and sobbed.

The apple tree logs having filled the room with their scent, were now burning low and the room was getting cold. Soon it would be two o'clock. For the third time, Philippa asked dully:

"Mother, don't you think you ought to go to bed?"

"Your father said he would telephone," she answered.

She had put on her spectacles to read, but more often the book remained unread on her lap, and she knitted mechanically, as her eyes fixed the dying fire in the chimney.

"I ought to have gone," she said suddenly. "There would have been room for me in the car. Johnny wouldn't have minded. Oh, Philippa, why didn't I insist? Look in your father's big dictionary, and see what it says about meningitis."

"That's the best way of getting ourselves frightened unnecessarily," said Philippa. "Wait till Daddy telephones."

"No, look it up now. I ought to have thought about it before."

Philippa lifted the weighty volume from the shelf, and after a few moments, began:

"Inflammation of the . . ."

"Of the what, child?"

Philippa's eyes, jumping ahead, had caught the words 'often fatal.' They danced in front of her. She felt violently sick.

"No," she said, closing the book, and putting it back.

"I can't. It's technical. We wouldn't understand."

"The best suffering," said Mrs. Dale suddenly, "is childbirth. It hurts, but at least we have it ourselves. Temperatures that go up and down are the worst. It's the waiting, the long helpless hoping that next time the

thermometer will read a point lower. Why did your father tell me to stay? Why did I obey? I hate obeying and I'd like to have been a man and been a soldier or a doctor or something that matters. Being brought up in a university city, especially in a don's house, is the most maddening business. Those young men who all had chances to be important people, made me wildly jealous. I don't believe half of them realised how lucky they were, just to be men! When I had Gregory, it was better. I try and believe that he'll be everything I wanted to be. Oh, child, I'm so miserable. Why didn't I go? If he were to die, I would die. There would be nothing to live for. Gregory is me! He's my hopes and thoughts put in a man's frame."

She looked up quickly:

"I shouldn't talk to you like this. I have never known how to talk to you."

Her knitting needles clicked furiously.

Philippa said almost harshly:

"Does everybody want to be something else?"

The clock struck two.

"There's the telephone!"

The bell repeated its double drone stridently through the deadness of the night.

"Oh, dear God!" moaned Mrs. Dale. "Let him be better."

Philippa had jumped up but her mother, who had also risen, brushed her aside.

"No," she said, "I'll answer."

Philippa trembled as Mrs. Dale lifted the receiver. Then:

"Yes, my dear, I can hear perfectly. A little better? But I can come to-morrow if I want to. But of course I

want to. Yes, even if he is better. Because you may have to come back for the service on Sunday? Yes, I understand. You needn't speak so loud. I'll look up a good train. But you promise the doctor thinks he's better? Where are you staying? At the Mitre. Very well. Good-night, darling."

The sound of Marc's voice momentarily reassured Mrs. Dale. That she should take a good train in the morning, and remain near Gregory while Marc came back to hold his Sunday services eased her feeling of helplessness. Marc had said three times that Gregory was better. But 'better' was a deceitful word in the early stages of an illness, and perhaps he was holding back the truth. She should have asked about Gregory's temperature. The telephone frightened her. When Marc shouted, or when the line was faint she often lost her nerve on less important occasions than this. Now that Marc, with stooping shoulders and bent, tired head, would be groping his way along some creaking hotel corridor on his way to a lonely bedroom, Mrs. Dale would have liked to call him back for a longer, more intimate talk. She could not stand being separated from her family. As soon as she was alone, her imagination thought up a thousand dangers into which those she loved could fall. That first night after she had left Gregory at his preparatory school, for instance, had been one of continual tears.

She went up to her room and, on the landing, kissed Philippa on the temple and bade her good-night, but she was thinking about the letters which Gregory had written to her at various periods of his growing up. They were tied together with knitting wool of various colours, and she would often read them at two or three in the morning, for as she grew older she found it increasingly difficult to

sleep. Marc slept like a top. She had a desk with a silver candlestick in the corner of the bedroom and between bouts of reading and writing, while the author of the *History of the Sixteenth Century* snored, she would wander about the house like a ghost, dragging her feet in camel-hair slippers. Sometimes she went into the kitchen to make tea. Insomnia is an appalling thing. But Mrs. Dale conquered it by leading a strange, nocturnal life during which she thought about things for which she would have had no time in the middle of the day.

Mrs. Dale left the rectory just after eight, in a taxi, for the junction a few miles from the village. Philippa thought it unlikely that her mother had slept, but by now she had put on the hard, rather stern expression which so often hid what was frail or weak. Marc had appeared evasive on the telephone, merely saying that Gregory was no worse, but he sounded thankful to hear that Mrs. Dale was about to leave, and Philippa, who had taken the message, thought she detected less confidence in his voice than when he had telephoned in the early hours.

She was now in charge of the rectory. Whatever she did, in whatever room she went, Gregory followed her like a cloud, not necessarily pushing out every other thought, but darkening it, and making her realise that however much their ways might have divided, he was still something vital in her existence, that if he went. . . . Well, it was difficult to envisage such a thing happening.

In the kitchen the newly made marmalade was standing on the dresser with Marc's Lexicon, Mrs. Dale's row of neatly mended socks and the sweater which Philippa had washed and ironed. The robin which the milkman had brought, had achieved the miracle of not succumbing to

its accident, and though it still appeared awkward on its feet, it was beginning to take interest in the cold November sun. The maid had not arrived. Perhaps she had decided to work in a factory.

The breakfast which Philippa had made for her mother still lay on a cloth at the end of the long table in the dining-room. Before clearing it away Philippa poured herself out a cup of lukewarm tea, for she had been too busy looking after Mrs. Dale to have anything herself. The house was terribly silent and she thought Prudence was lucky to live in a caravan and have a husband who, though living so near to the research station, was apparently always the last to clock in. The Gregory cloud was growing unbearable. She ran to the dictionary to look up again the description of the illness which she had not dared to read to her mother. Kneeling on the carpet in front of the fire which was out, she tried to understand the medical terms. Then, brought up in the fear of God, she repeated the Lord's Prayer, but the words, because of their familiarity, fell from her lips as a jingle instead of a series of cries from the soul, and she was so dissatisfied with herself that she said: "I'd pray better in church."

She raced upstairs, tied a scarf over her head, tore down again, through the side door into the lane, and across the main road. She thought of her father sitting by the bed, her mother racing towards her son in an express train. A sense of urgency overcame her. She wanted to plead for him before it was too late. The Saxon church was never locked, and this was perhaps the most attaching thing about it. But it was so cold and damp inside, the stone and flint, the slate and marble emitted such vicious waves of double pneumonia that she shuddered as she passed the font and covered her throat with the ends of her scarf. It

would have been warmer in the earth. This was sepulchral. But she swung open the oak door in the screen and, prostrating herself at the altar rail, repeated her simple cry to Heaven: "Please don't let him die!"

She wished she had brought a coat. She was shivering in her dress. Her teeth were chattering. A black marble stone sent waves of frigidity into her knees, protected only by the silk of her stockings. She looked down, surprised at the coldness of this cold, and its insistence in wanting to flow into her body. She read:

*Sacred to the memory of Clementine, the
only daughter of William Hallendyce.*

*Born the 4th March 1808. Died the 10th
December 1823.*

Did real people die so young, people who were not just names on a slab of onyx? Had some sweet girl of fifteen been placed under here on a cold winter day like this one? Philippa had read these words scores of times but the Hallendyces had always seemed a legend, like Boadicea or Henry the Eighth. They had suddenly a terrible message for her, that one day they had been alive and the next that they were dead.

The black shadow behind her—the fear that Gregory would die—brought back to her lips a series of incoherent appeals to a God whom she was beginning lately very much to neglect. Her mind wandered again towards the plaque of shining copper on the wall, the inscription she knew by heart, about the soldier of Waterloo who had planted the tree in his brother's, the rector's, garden:

*Lieut.-Colonel Charles Hallendyce who
served in the Peninsular Campaign and
was also present at Leipsig, Arcis-sur-
Aube and Waterloo.*

What an age between the red coats of Waterloo and the Flying Bombs of the last war!

The autumn daisies smothered the choir stalls. Philippa realised with shame that she had not even troubled to help her mother decorate the church with all these flowers which now seemed to presage something whose significance her mind was not fully able to grasp.

VI

THE sun felt warm when she came out of the church, and the air was full of wintry smells. She stood sunning herself a moment in front of the dark boughs of the almond tree.

The porch was very pretty, exactly as you would expect to find a porch if you went back to Napoleonic days when soldiers wore red tunics and the squire jogged down the village street on horseback. The church door was in the form of a pointed arch, there was a finely meshed iron gate in front of it; and on each side of the porch, lengthways, there was an oak bench like those that used to stand outside country inns. A lantern swinging and creaking from an oak beam cast sun shadows on russet coloured tiles. A copy of the church magazine and a table of kindred and affinity were nailed to a board.

A few roses, nipped by frost, clung to the bushes against the red brick wall which divided the garden from the research station whose empire stood beyond. The garden was not as tidy as it used to be because the sexton, being eighty, had retired. Nobody was interested in keeping the grass trim or washing down the gravestones with salt and water, or caring for the wooden memorials which looked like stocks and were so old that one could not read the inscriptions. Sometimes old Eadie, the organist, would weed the gravel paths, but he was rheumatic and feared the damp.

Philippa, back at the rectory, was delighted to find Doris in the kitchen, and she began to talk about all sorts of trivialities to keep her mind off Gregory. Then, seeing that the robin, now recovered, was trying to find a way out of its cage, she took it carefully in her hands and set it down on the gravel path in front of the kitchen door. Once or twice it stumbled; then flew to the holly bush, and from there, sure of itself, in a straight line to one of the higher branches of a beech. Superstitiously, she felt certain that in return for setting the bird free, she would have good news from Oxford. Meanwhile, she was in undisputed charge of the house.

Doris wanted to go home immediately after lunch because she had been told there were soap flakes at the oil stores. She was discussing soaps and washing powders in a general way when Johnny walked down the lane.

Philippa hurried to meet him, but she was intimidated, and said: "Oh, thanks for last night. Thanks, Johnny." Then urgently, her desire for news overcoming her shyness, "Did you see Gregory?"

"No," he answered; "your father only stayed at the hospital a few minutes. I drove him to The Mitre and came straight back."

"Thanks," she repeated, mechanically. "Father rang me up this morning. Mother has gone to join him." There was a pause; then, looking up at him anxiously: "I thought he was trying to hurry her. Tell me the truth. Is Gregory worse?"

"He's bad, but he's young. That should help."

"Yes, of course. Anyway, it's nice of you to come."

She felt incapable of making further progress in their conversation, but Johnny went on: "It seems funny coming

back here. Last night was the first time since before the war. I wish you hadn't turned up when the men were initiating that youngster. You hated me, didn't you?"

"Yes," she answered truthfully, "I did."

He looked at her more confidently, and continued "Do you remember we used to call the top of the reservoir the seaside? If you had a moment we could climb there for a breath of air. I've been up most of the night, and you are all nerves."

She could hear Doris singing untunefully as she polished the banisters in the hall. There was no lunch to make and nobody would need her for another hour. She threw a tweed coat over her shoulders, and without even troubling to close the door followed Johnny down the lane.

Some twenty yards beyond the church the road forked, one arm taking all the traffic, the other, overgrown with weeds, sweeping towards the great inland sea, where it came to an abrupt stop at the foot of the high embankment whose sides were covered with blackberry bushes, brambles and yellow gorse. In the days of the squires there was the prettiest green where children played under a great elm whose broken trunk was still to be seen by the church wall. It was a strange experience to look at this road which led nowhere. There was even a signpost on which was written the name of the hamlet now under water.

The embankment was protected by tall railings. Just behind the church, however, there was a way, to those who knew, of climbing over them. All one need do was to open a wooden gate which, being the same height as the railings, provided a method of scaling them. On the other side there was an oil drum which the people from the research station had rolled there on purpose. Clambering down from the oil drum on to the prickly grass was not an easy

manœuvre in a tight skirt, but Johnny was proud to show Philippa how strong he was by taking her in his arms.

Many people who lived in the neighbourhood had never been to the top of the embankment. One often heard some woman, standing at her cottage door, say to a neighbour: "The wind's from over the water to-day. If you were to go up there, dearie, you wouldn't even see across to the other side. My husband says it's like the front at Brighton. And the fish, dearie, the fish . . ."

Yes, the fish were the great attraction. Most of the older inhabitants went fishing once a week, the authorities giving permits without difficulty, and they brought back something good for supper.

The wives were not correct in comparing the reservoir to the front at Brighton, except in so far that the wind, billowing across the water, had a tang about it. One could see the other side, distantly, and this morning, as Philippa and Johnny stood there, impressed by this magnificent expanse, the farther bank glimmered white.

"Do you remember when we were children," said Philippa, "Gregory used to pretend that he was Æneas sailing back to Ithaca? I had to hide in the gorse bushes and be Penelope unweaving the loose bits in my jumper."

"Of course, I remember," said Johnny enthusiastically. "The funny thing is that one really does have the impression of looking at the sea. What are those low, white buildings on the distant shore? And the piece of land jutting out—is it an island or a peninsular? Do you suppose the needle at the end of it is a lighthouse? What does it matter? It's fun pretending. Oh, it's wonderful to travel! I wish I could tell you how excited I was when our troopship arrived in the Indian Ocean! The sea was as calm as this lake."

He described his voyages, using the water and distant hills as a map. She listened happily, enjoying the sound of his voice, though not receptive to detail. She was thinking that it would be pleasant to travel, not so much for the scenery, but because amongst new people in a different environment, her personality could expand. She wondered vaguely what sort of a husband Johnny would make.

They walked round the edge of the basin. The water was lapping gently against the cement sides. Cattle moved slowly between the gorse bushes to their left, tearing at the grass. Far down below them lay a strange world of huts and sheds, with people hurrying like ants, intent on wresting from science her secrets of to-morrow. From here it was easy to see how the church and the rectory were not strong enough to stand up against the expanding new world. The machine would roll across the impotent hamlet as the waters of the artificial lake had boiled over the thatched cottages of an old English village. Then, of course, because the shadow did not for an instant leave her, she thought of her distracted parents pleading with the angel of death, and she suddenly covered her eyes with her hands and said: "Wherever I look I see death!"

He had been talking about a magnificent journey he made in Burma, and now realised that she had not been listening, that, far from forgetting her misery, this walk on the crest of the world had made it worse. He was afraid that she would faint and fall into the water, and quickly he put his arm round her waist. Their hands touched.

Philippa's heart stopped suddenly. Never, in all her life, had she felt anything like this. Her emotion at this instant was not sensual, but utterly bewildering. She wondered what had gone wrong inside her. It was as if she had received a knock-out blow. Then gradually, as life came

back, a feeling crept into her mind that something had happened between Johnny and herself, something that would last always. She shook herself violently and exclaimed:

"Let's go back, Johnny. Do you mind?"

He looked at her, deciding she was a strange girl full of unexpected impulses, and then he followed her down the steep incline, while the sun dipped into the greyness of the winter sky.

In the evening Marc telephoned. He would still try to come back for Sunday, but he was not quite so sure. As soon as he began hoping, he said, the fever rose and the doctors became more evasive. Mrs. Dale had arrived safely, but was in a pitiful condition. She wanted to do something. She was not allowed by the doctors to remain long beside her son. When she was sent away, she scolded Marc, saying that if her son died she would kill herself over his lifeless body. The hotel, the hotel where people came and went as if things were quite normal, made them both feel so bad that they were going to ask permission to spend the night on the hospital stairs. Some people did that. Neither of them could eat anything. The merest piece of bread choked them. He simply must steel himself for her mother's sake, but even as he spoke his voice broke and he began to sob like a big child.

When Philippa heard him collapse, she felt like rushing to him, but he entreated her to stay at the rectory. If she did not remain there, he might be obliged to return himself. Please, would she promise to stay where she was? She promised. It was deadful to discover that he was in a more pitiful state than the night before.

For a moment, after replacing the receiver, she thought of going to Prudence, but somehow it seemed like breaking

in on the intimacy of the young people to knock at the caravan door. They might be in bed. It was dreadful to have a front door which opened more or less directly on to one's only three rooms!

She had lit a huge fire in her father's study, because she was lonely and a tiny bit frightened, not of burglars, but of the strange and terrible things that were happening to the family, to Gregory, to her mother, and to Marc. Misery had descended swiftly upon the house, and she almost expected to turn and see death with his scythe standing at the door.

Because she hated to remain idle, and not having the heart to read, she had brought down one of her skirts to lengthen. Since she had started to wear her clothes longer, those which she had not yet altered seemed absurdly short, and she even felt cold and naked when they showed her knees. Her mind was always most full of ideas when she was sewing, but Johnny kept on breaking into her mental vision. She felt the wind from across the lake brushing up against her hair, his arm round her waist, and the touch of his hand on hers. Then suddenly her heart would stop. Vapours rose in her head.

Had Johnny felt like this when he took her hand? Surely not; he must have known many violent emotions during the six years he was in the Far East. But in her case something vital and lasting had happened. Now that the first shock was over, waves of contentment billowed up her spine. Every other thought was pushed out of her mind, even the drama taking place inside the grim walls of the hospital at Oxford. She was ashamed now of the eagerness she had shown to bring Johnny into what, perhaps, had been the most solemn moment of her life. Had she called him in merely to help her father arrive with all speed at

Gregory's bedside, or had she seized upon this opportunity to answer Johnny's letter which had been burning her mind since breakfast? Before God she could not deny that this consideration had played a part in her quick suggestion.

What exactly had her mother meant by saying that she never quite knew how to talk to her?

Mother and daughter had come to realise that their characters were diametrically opposed. Mrs. Dale had surprisingly, during that solemn evening, confessed that she had desired all her life to be a man. She had passed her personality into her son's frame. Whoever would have guessed the complexity of her mind? There was something of a drama of Sophocles in her mother's amazing admission. Gregory's illness had suddenly stripped all of them of their masks—Marc helpless, crying, Philippa less concerned about her brother than burnt up by a desire to feel Johnny's hand once again on hers.

She went into the kitchen to heat the iron and steam out the hem in her skirt. She, at any rate, had no desire to be a man. She had never felt more feminine than at this moment, more anxious to prove herself intelligent and pretty, but her heart called out for somebody with whom she could discuss this great happening, somebody who would not look at her incredulously, or with blame.

The house was devastatingly still, and for the first time in her life she was afraid to go to bed. By a series of hallucinations, as she passed restlessly from room to room, she saw again all sorts of childhood incidents in which Gregory played some part, as a knight, as a troubadour, or simply as a little boy in knickers teaching her to make paper boats.

Then gradually these pictures vanished, and Philippa's thoughts turned to the school where Christine Vanderstock had replaced Gregory as the important influence in her life. Christine was, in appearance, a languid person with the most perfect oval features and large blue eyes which opened and closed slowly under immensely long lashes. Her voice was querulous and babylike, and her lips sensuous and as naturally blood-red as the inside of a pomegranate. As soon as Philippa found herself seated in the classroom beside this beautiful girl, she prayed fervently that she would be able to find some way of pleasing her enough to be admitted to her court.

One day she passed Christine a slip of paper with the solution of an arithmetical problem. Christine turned her eyes gratefully towards her companion, whose heart immediately thumped with pride. Afterwards on the lawn of the ivy-covered school house, Christine had made it clear that Philippa was going to be her friend, her best friend, and her confidante.

This was another of those moments which she would never forget. Their affection was so warm and satisfying that Philippa tried to merge her personality in that of her friend. It seemed quite natural for her to place her dreams at Christine's feet. She knew already so much more about life, and her ingenuous blue eyes displayed a shattering disregard for authority which seemed quite amazing to the rector's daughter, who had been brought up in an atmosphere of discipline.

Christine had a fortune of her own. Her father had left it to her absolutely. Her mother had hastened to marry again, and Christine in her baby drawl sometimes let out the most unexpected bursts of cynicism. At sixteen she was perfectly aware of her power over men, and her confi-

dences were often so disconcerting that Philippa thought she must invent them, because fundamentally she had the sweetest, most generous nature in the world, and loved to whirl Philippa into her various girlhood enthusiasms. First it was Joan of Arc, whose religious fervour and intense patriotism transported them into such ecstasy that they dreamt of being burnt at the stake. They were going to visit Orleans and Rouen. If the war lasted too long, they would go there in disguise and raise an army against the Germans. The whole of France would rally to their banner. They would die heroically and be turned into saints. Afterwards they chose as their heroine Christine's namesake, the Queen of Sweden, who gave up her throne because, as Voltaire says, she preferred the conversation of clever people to a palace with a lot of dullheads. They would be clever and witty like her and astound everybody by their erudition and intrepid horsemanship.

Christine attached a great deal of importance to this last quality. She looked so frail, so ascetic, so like a gilded lily, that it seemed strange to think of her galloping into the wind, and yet she had won prizes at Richmond and ridden with the Quorn. Philippa was to come and stay with her after the war, and they would ride. But after they left school, though they continued to correspond, they were never able to arrange this holiday.

Worn out, but incapable of going to bed, Philippa went to her father's study and sat in front of the fire which she kept high because the spitting logs gave life to the abandoned house. At last, something told her that her brother was going to die.

In her growing misery, she accused herself of causing his death by her selfishness. She rushed to the telephone with

the intention of asking Johnny Fairchild to drive her to Oxford. But even as her hand touched the receiver, she realised how improper it would be for her to do any such thing, and she went slowly back to the study.

Her father's high-backed chair was just as he liked to have it. The cushion on which Gregory had tried to stifle the red-hot stick by sitting on it was puffed out, and one had the impression it was waiting for the rector to resume his sedentary life. But would life at the rectory really begin again where it had left off? She slipped to her knees, burying her face in the cushion, and fell insensibly asleep.

VII

EARLY next morning Prudence arrived on her way to the schools. Philippa was feeling better. She had soaked her stiff limbs in a hot bath and was now having a stand-up breakfast in the kitchen. The sun had come out and was throwing a warm glow over the garden.

"Any news?" asked Prudence, putting her head through the window.

"Not yet, Prudy, but I am hoping that means good news. I even think Daddy may be on his way back. Have you time for a cup of tea?"

"Yes," she answered; "I need it. Bill's got the sack."

"Bill's got the sack?" echoed Philippa incredulously. "Why? What has he done?"

Prudence scraped the thick mud off her rubbers and threw her bag on the kitchen table. "Because the catering manager has a wife, and Bill won't play," she said, looking up curiously. "A woman expects to get pushed around, but a man! What sort of set-up have they across the way when a young fellow like Bill has to . . ."

She was both proud of Bill and furious at this unexpected turn of events. Obviously she and Bill had been pacing up and down the boards of their caravan like caged animals all night. Bill will have to go and find a job elsewhere. If it was far, Prudence would be obliged to give up teaching at the schools and follow her husband

"If Daddy is back for lunch," said Philippa, "we could talk it over with him. We must do something."

She had visions of the caravan being hauled out of the muddy field by old Ganner's scraggy horse and then being pushed by its owners slowly but irrevocably along the dusty roads to a new and distant location.

The school bell rang, and Philippa accompanied her friend as far as the green gate. Little girls were arriving from everywhere in their pixie hoods and red scarves. A riding master came along with a dozen animals in single file, attached to each other by leading reins, the tallest first, the ponies bringing up the rear, so small that infants could ride them. As they clattered off along the smooth road of the highway, Johnny came round the corner in his car. He drew up by the red letter-box let into the rectory wall, and jumped out.

She smiled and said: "I'm feeling a thousand times better, Johnny. I think it's the sun. I half expect Daddy to come back for lunch. He hasn't telephoned."

He made a movement as if to take her hand, and now the relationship was quite different from what it had been when they were on the brink of the lake. The nervousness was over. If he put his arm round her this time she was ready to enjoy being close to him.

"Philippa," he said awkwardly, "let's find somewhere to be alone."

She looked up, surprised that he should let her see how nervous he was.

"Where?" she asked.

He turned up the lane, and when they were by the hollow tree where she had gone to read his letter in secret he exclaimed:

"Philippa!"

His voice was veiled.

She looked at him, torn between a desire to hurl herself into his arms and to cry out in fear. There was something in his look that terrified her, that made her cold and hot, and shivery. The walnut tree on the other side of the fence began to grow dim. The field, the green gate, and the rectory danced and turned.

"Gregory?" she cried. "Is it Gregory?"

His arms were holding her tightly.

"You must be brave," he said softly. "Your father telephoned. He asked me to tell you. He couldn't do it himself. Gregory . . . Gregory died last night."

As Philippa had apprehended, the rectory was no longer the same place as the quiet house of affectionate happenings and regular habits in which she had grown up. Grief blew through all the rooms, leaving a coldness which made her shudder.

Mrs. Dale still had a sort of impersonal energy, but as soon as Marc's bent frame and emaciated features were lit up by the lights of the car which brought them from the station Philippa knew that her father had been struck down as effectively as with a stroke. He pressed her arm touchingly, but hardly said a word and appeared very old.

The coffin was placed in Marc's study. That Gregory should be brought back in this manner completed the confusion in Philippa's mind, for her youth made it hard to realise that such immense, overwhelming tragedies do not merely happen in the house next door. The episode at the carpenter's shop hovered like a nightmare at the back of her mind. She asked herself how men could laugh about death and place a child for a joke between planks which



for others would become so soon an object to bend over with tears.

The sun which had given her such false joy the morning when Prudence had come for breakfast in the kitchen did not return. Rain fell mercilessly for hours at a time, but just before the funeral a sort of silver gleam escaped from the low clouds, making the damp, smooth road shine in an unnatural light.

At ten minutes before two, old Eadie, the organist, who lived in Buffalo Lane, climbed the steep ladder leading to the belfry to toll the bell. This was the oldest part of the church, but the stone was hidden by white walls, half timbering, and a piece of damask with fleurs-de-lys on a blue ground. Through a narrow window he could see the coffin covered with flowers being brought across the road. Johnny Fairchild was one of the pall-bearers. The two women followed, heads bent and in black, but Marc was in his surplice.

The bell tolled, but its sad message was muffled by the throb of an engine pumping diesel oil into a giant tank in the research station. The coffin was carried through the ancient porch and laid between the magnificent Saxon font and the screen, still decorated with the autumn daisies which Mrs. Dale had picked in the rectory garden for the Harvest Festival. The flowers were beginning to droop, but they made the stone and flint appear less naked. Many of Marc's parishioners had come as a sign of their affection, for though he had few they were faithful. His voice was almost inaudible. A white terrier which Bill had brought to Prudence from the town ran in through the open door in search of his new mistress. He looked so pleased and ready for a game. Several people shooed him out, but nicely. He came back, and they had to close the door.

The coffin was raised and taken as far as the Communion Table, where the pall-bearers turned. All the Hallendyces were there behind their stone or bronze slabs, even poor little Clementine under onyx. There were six great candlesticks on the Communion Table and a tiny oil lamp. Over the stained-glass window were the words: "Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ."

The doors were opened wide and the puppy came prancing back, and then began to dance as he ran ahead of the slow procession, but nobody had the heart to shoo him away. Some of the memorials were in the form of Elizabethan four-posters in granite. A moat ran round the church. There were little ogival doors which led into the coal cellars, and one might have thought they had been made for pixies, not humans.

Then, suddenly, when the mourners had walked almost all round the church, they came upon the gaping hole. It was under a small yew tree, and the gravediggers, to make it less terrible, had lined the edges with damp moss. Now the coffin was lowered into the grave, and a gust of wind, billowing across the sounds from the artificial lake higher up to the left, shook Marc's stoles, causing them to dance and to turn against the white surplice. Philippa bent down and picked a sprig of evergreen which she furtively threw into the deep hole. Marc bowed his head. His last prayer had been scarcely audible. The white dog had another grand lark round the graves, and one of the undertakers, his work finished, picked up the tall silk hat he had carefully deposited at the foot of a marble angel. The yew tree was full of twittering birds, tits and robins, who seemed to be waiting for the little crowd of humans to disappear. Philippa became aware of Johnny standing beside her. As he looked at her full of pity she felt immensely grateful for his presence.

He accompanied her as far as the Victorian post-box let into the brown brick of the rectory wall. Then he left her. She was all alone now, and shivered as she passed through the green door of the damp house. Her parents had retired behind a barrier dividing their dejection from the world about them. Philippa was tempted to run into the study and light a huge crackling fire, but she remembered her mother saying she no longer wanted to hear a bird sing or to have anything bright, like flowers, brought into the house.

The evening meal, in these circumstances, was lugubrious in the extreme. Nobody talked above a whisper, and the dry bread stuck in Philippa's throat. Of course, Gregory's name was not once mentioned, though little things which had once belonged to him kept on cropping up in the house. After Philippa had cleared the supper and washed up, Mrs. Dale said to her with a vague, faraway look:

"My dear, if I were you I would go to bed early; you look quite exhausted."

Clearly the usual vigil in Marc's study would be unbearable to-night. The three members of the family were not in tune even in their sorrow. Philippa felt that more than ever her parents considered her a person of no importance, and their exclusive grief struck her as an insult. Two opposite thoughts, two visions merged and fought for her attention—the grave under the yew tree and Johnny. Johnny's silhouette drifted against the winter bareness of her father's churchyard, and the coffin remained suspended above the hole into which it was to be lowered. Gregory's death had filled her with a new awareness of the shortness of life, the realisation that this thing could happen to her, not necessarily when she was very old like her parents, but now, almost immediately before she had started to live. As

soon as Johnny's presence came into the picture everything changed. Something warm and comforting seemed to float round him. The least look (and what looks he gave!) and the most ordinary word from his lips produced an enchantment from which she was neither willing nor able to escape. It was because he had left her at the rectory wall that the house was now so damp and impossible. He was superior to other men in the harm he had done her and the affection he had brought her. The diabolical impression he made at their reunion actually enhanced his prestige in her eyes. She felt drawn to what she supposed must be a cruel but possessive taint in his nature.

The two pictures together—Johnny and Gregory's grave—were producing in her mind a sort of romanticism, an urge to taste the excitements of love before death claimed her. She was in a high state of nerves when she arrived in her bedroom. She found it impossible to read. Her favourite books seemed merely to say: "We have lived but we are dead." Yes, all those women authors for whom she had such admiration, and envy, perhaps, were now as lifeless as Gregory:

"The queen white as a lily
Who sang with the voice of a mermaid,

.

And Joan, the good Lorraine
Whom the English burnt at Rouen?
Where are they, Virgin Mary?
But where are the snows of yesterday?"

She tried to find in religion a balm for her soul, but once

again she found that her faith, which had been all trusting in childhood, was not now sufficient to help her in a crisis so full of doubts and misgivings. Her beliefs seemed to be crumbling like the walls of the Saxon church, whose stones were shattered by the vibrations of the research station. She felt ashamed, but for the moment it was Johnny's presence she needed.

Mrs. Dale came to kiss her daughter good-night. She looked so intolerably unhappy that Philippa felt a burst of tenderness, and she threw herself into her mother's arms, but Mrs. Dale quickly showed that her daughter's sympathy could not make up for the loss of her son, and she extricated herself almost brutally. The two women faced each other with something approaching antagonism. "Every time I make a gesture," thought Philippa, "that is what happens; she turns to stone. If I had died and Gregory was still here, it would be another story!"

She remained motionless for a long time after her mother had gone.

Then a thought struck her, that they were both suffering from a sort of paroxysm of love. There were stories of certain women in her mother's family, charming, but whose violent passions had driven them to the most exalted acts, even to suicide. Marc, turning to his wife, had once said, smiling: "Thank goodness, my dear Margaret, there is nothing to fear on that score from you!" And, indeed, there seemed outwardly nothing to show that Mrs. Dale was capable of any passionate act.

She had loved her husband dutifully, but that was all. Marc, of course, was not the sort of man to inspire a blind passion. He was too good and reasonable. All Mrs. Dale's affection had been concentrated on her son. And now that

he was gone, what had Mrs. Dale left? Marc could get on by himself, floating dreamily through successive volumes of his work on the sixteenth century. Philippa? But Philippa was a girl. Could life, therefore, offer any further interest to Mrs. Dale? No, assuredly. "There would be nothing to live for if Gregory went. Gregory is me!" she had said.

Philippa threw herself on her bed without having the courage to undress. She was convinced that her mother's apparent lack of affection hid some plan which she would on no account reveal to her daughter. After a time this feeling became so strong that she went out into the passage, where a cold wind was blowing up from the hall. Softly she opened the door of her parents' bedroom. She could hear her father's heavy breathing; he had not slept for three nights.

She was about to return to her own room when, bending over the banisters, she noticed that the front door was wide open. A shudder ran down her spine. She remained for a moment swaying at the top of the stairs; then she ran out into the night.

She felt herself irresistibly drawn towards Gregory's grave. Her instinct told her that she would find her mother there. Her dress caught in the hedge by the rectory field. She ran blindly across the road. The Saxon church stood out in a phosphorescent light and shrub and stones made eerie shadows across white graves. Under the yew, still dripping with rain, Mrs. Dale was doubled up as motionless as the marble angel at whose feet the undertaker had placed his silk hat during the ceremony. Philippa dropped on her knees at her side and whispered:

"Mother!"

Mrs. Dale answered hoarsely:

"It's his first night, Philippa. Yesterday I still had him under my roof. I could look at him from time to time. But now he has been taken away from me. I have come to shelter him from the damp and cold. He needs me. He needs the warmth of my body to keep out the rain."

"Mother, the wind is terribly cold."

Mrs. Dale laughed.

"You don't know yet what it is to love. There is no such thing as love without suffering. I nearly died bringing him into the world. Do you think I'm afraid of going where he has gone? The women of our family have never loved like other women. We don't stay in our warm beds when our loved ones are cold. We would beg for them, steal for them, die for them."

She rose suddenly, and said:

"Don't be afraid, Philippa. I am not going to hang myself from the cedar tree or throw myself into the lake. All of me that matters is with him already."

She put out an arm and pulled her daughter out of the wet grass.

"Poor child," she said, with unexpected gentleness. "I suppose you will be the next one to suffer."

VIII

ONE morning, about a month later, Prudence put her head through the kitchen window and, seeing Philippa exclaimed:

"Bill's got a smashing job!"

Philippa ran out to meet her friend. A big orange sun had come out of the white mist above the place they called Buffalo Lane, and the holly was full of berries. The countryside had taken on again an easy, jog-trot, 18th century look, and one felt that little by little the tragedy of the promising undergraduate would be softened by the falling leaves and take its place in village history with memories of the various scarlet-coated Hallendyces and poor little Clementine, who slipped out of the world before she had time to be taken to her first ball.

"What is it?" asked Philippa excitedly.

Johnny had found him the job, explained Prudy (Philippa blushed with pleasure), driving trucks for Mrs. Green, who now had a fleet of twenty. Bill said there were possibilities.

Prudy smiled happily.

"The old caravan is safe!" she laughed. "We can even do it up a bit."

Mrs. Green had lost her husband in the first world war. She had put her money in a 'bus which she had driven herself, and when she had enough to buy a second she had engaged a man to help her. The recent war and the arrival

of the research station had enormously increased her business. Every morning and evening a fleet of motor coaches ran between the research station and the town.

Prudy, having imparted her news, went off airily down the lane. Her gaiety had filled the rectory kitchen with something even warmer than the sunshine. Philippa, watching her go, thought contentedly that Johnny, in finding Bill a job, had done so chiefly to put the rectory a little more in his debt. His anxiety to be useful was a subtle way of showing her he cared.

The rectory had become a drowsy place.

Large rooms, tidy, smelling of autumn flowers and polished wood, were unchanging from day to day. No new people ever came. Marc dragged his misery from upstairs, where Mrs. Dale had taken to her bed, to his study, where often he stared vacantly into the embers of the fire. Nobody spoke above a whisper. Meal followed meal, just Marc and Philippa, mournfully dull.

In the morning room, where Marc had taught Gregory when he was a little boy, the child's slim figure and fair hair haunted every corner as if Gregory was more easily remembered at that tender age than grown up. Marc would go stealthily there with a Homer because he had initiated his son at nine or ten into the splendours of the Iliad, and he could thus, sitting in his chair, bring back glimpses of those mornings when the lad would question him eagerly. Perhaps, also, it lightened his grief to think how old Priam suffered when his son Hector was returned to him lifeless.

Mrs. Dale, who remained in her bedroom with the blinds drawn to keep out the glory of autumnal days, took little notice of her daughter even when she came in with the meals on a tray. Indeed there were times when Philippa might not have existed. Then, suddenly, she would say

something unkind as if it annoyed her to see her daughter looking so slim and youthful, so full of vitality, whilst her son was no longer there.

Philippa said nothing, but her thoughts turned to Johnny. Being in love made the dullness of the rectory just bearable.

What troubled Johnny was the inaccessibility of the girl he loved. He had been brought up to believe that the people in the rectory were a law unto themselves. When Mrs. Fairchild used to wash Johnny's face and brush his hair to go to play with the rector's children she would utter words of caution about the proper behaviour she expected of him. The rector's family was poor in money, poorer than the Fairchilds, but rich in erudition. Mrs. Fairchild, who was not sure of her spelling and had an arithmetic of her own in calculating her bills, had an old-fashioned respect for squire and rector. The Fairchilds had been builders for six generations; Mrs. Fairchild had been in service before the first world war. She could never happily assimilate democratic ideas.

Johnny, of course, had served brilliantly in Burma, but since he had come out of the army he was merely earning a carpenter foreman's wage. Being in love with Philippa made him more than usually dissatisfied with this humble position in his parent's business which prevented him from calling on the Dales socially. As a matter of fact, nobody called on the Dales socially. That was one of the reasons why life at the Rectory was so out of joint with the times.

When Johnny had been so picturesquely brave in Burma he was known for his resourcefulness. He could always get a thing done. He tried now to show the same efficiency in planning his next step to see Philippa. The excuse he

was looking for came accidentally one afternoon when his father, Abe, said to him:

"There's a buttress at the church in a terrible bad state of repair. The rector's wrote me twice about it."

Johnny had exclaimed:

"Let me go, Dad. With all those other things you have in hand, you'll never find time."

"No, son, that I won't," Abe answered. "Go and see him when you're passing that way; but with things as they are now I'm not saying we can do it for nothing, not if it's important."

That same afternoon Johnny put on his new suit and called at the rectory.

Marc seldom received visitors, especially parish visitors, in his study. He had always followed the theory that home life was home life and the parish was the parish, but when Johnny called he felt obliged to make an exception. Though he had written both letters to Abe before Gregory's death, the buttress was still, in spite of his immense apathy, a matter of concern to him. He loved the church for its venerable age and magnificently simple proportions, and when anything endangered it he felt morally responsible.

He would therefore have received Johnny for this reason alone, but, of course, there was the fact that Johnny had rendered him personally an immense service on the night of tragedy which made his presence acceptable even when, as on this particular afternoon, he was more anxious than ever to remain alone with his thoughts.

He therefore said to the maid:

"Ask Mr. Fairchild junior to come in."

Johnny felt extremely nervous as he entered the rector's study. The tall bookshelves with their warm leather bind-

ings, the tapestry with the mediæval lady in her conical hat and veil, the sheets of foolscap covered with Marc's small writing, the discreet fire—these things he was not accustomed to. He thought confusedly, "This is what I ought to have in me to make me acceptable to Philippa."

Marc said:

"I am afraid, Johnny, there are no funds to repair the buttress, but if I could find enough money myself to buy the plaster or the cement, perhaps . . ."

He broke off hopelessly, and said with an apathetic smile:

"The church has become so dismally poor."

"Please don't let that worry you," said Johnny.

He was scared of his voice. He coughed to give himself courage, and went on:

"I'll send a workman. Dad might even come himself lunch times. You know what we are. Dad wouldn't charge you a penny."

"You and your father are much too kind. I really don't know what I can say to you both."

"I wish there were more things we could do for you, Mr. Dale."

He meant it. He would have wished, as in so many fairy tales, to have been given three superhuman tasks to win the hand of his princess. His enthusiasm was not noticed by Marc, who answered wanly:

"Thank you, Johnny; thank you."

He hesitated a moment, then added:

"By the way, if you are passing by Buffalo Lane, could you drop this note at old Eadie's?"

"Of course," answered Johnny tempestuously.

He had been disappointed, on arriving at the rectory, to discover that Doris, not Philippa, had opened the door.

This miscalculation had made his visit less spectacular than he had pictured it when he had set off so confidently from his father's yard.

Marc, at his study door, put a hand on Johnny's shoulder and smiled bravely. There was nothing much he could tell this young man except that he liked him and that he was grateful for his sympathy. "Give my regards to your parents," he said softly, "and thank them for sending you."

As Johnny crossed the hall he saw Doris disappearing up the stairs with a tea tray. He thought quickly, and decided to put his head through the kitchen door in the hope of finding Philippa there.

When he saw her, he was so pleased that he forgot what he had meant to say. Instead he explained lamely:

"I've been to see your father."

"I know," she answered; "Doris told me."

"I saw Doris going upstairs with a tray; otherwise I would not have dared."

"She's taking some tea to mother."

"That's what I guessed."

He came a little nearer, and when he could almost feel her hair he said:

"Your father gave me a letter for old Eadie in Buffalo Lane. Could you stand the idea of walking there and back?"

He took her elbows and, drawing her towards him till they were looking full into each other's eyes:

"Glad to see me?"

"Yes," she whispered truthfully, "terribly."

"Then let's go quickly before Doris comes down."

It was one of those afternoons towards the end of November when there are still a few frost-bitten rosebuds in the

gardens, and when the earth, between rain, smells delicious. The words Philippa had just spoken bound them in a mysterious spell. They walked along the path, holding each other by the hand, and because it was the first time they had admitted their love they felt ecstatic and guilty. When they spoke, it was to say nothing in particular. Their language was in the intonation of their voices and their reticencies.

"It was lucky you were in the kitchen," said Johnny as he squeezed her thumb. "Lucky, too, that I saw Doris going upstairs."

"I knew you were in the rectory," Philippa repeated.

"But if I hadn't come to see you on the way out?"

"I expect it was fate," said Philippa. "It just had to happen like that."

"But supposing it hadn't happened? Supposing I had gone without finding you?" He paused, then asked anxiously into the curls of her hair: "Would you have run after me?"

"No," she answered contentedly; "whatever next?"

Their fingers, entwined, squeezed harder. He went on:

"But you admitted you were glad to see me—you said you were terribly glad. It's the first time you've ever said anything like that, anything encouraging, I mean. Are you still glad?"

"Yes," she whispered, "still terribly glad."

This was love.

This was what she had thought about so often in the loneliness of her room. The mossy path, the holly hedge, the field where the horses tore at the short grass, all seemed alive with currents of electrified air.

"It wasn't to see your Dad I came—it was to see you," he said, looking up at the branches of the elm.

"I thought it was about the buttress," she said.

"How do you know?" he asked quickly—"I mean about the buttress?"

She turned her features smilingly towards him and answered:

"I suppose Doris must have told me. She heard you tell father."

"Did Doris tell you, or did you ask her?"

"I forget which."

His heart thumped with excitement.

"So you *were* interested?"

"Perhaps!"

There was nobody in the high road. Prudy's little girls were still at school. Now their arms were enlaced, their cheeks almost touching. Behind them the rectory slept in its Virginia-creeped tediousness. The afternoon was turning sultry.

Johnny stopped suddenly and asked:

"That's old Eadie's house over there, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, "but he's seldom in at this hour."

"What hour is it?"

"I haven't a watch," she answered, "but I know he won't be in now. He never is before tea-time."

"It doesn't matter," he objected, "just to leave a letter." Then, with interest, "why haven't you a watch?"

"I broke it," she said, watching the brown curly leaves drifting down from the copse by the manor house, "and they're not worth mending these days. I mean repairs take so long."

He looked at her proudly and said:

"I'd like to give you one—that is if you didn't mind." His expression took on an anxious attitude. "Would you mind?"

"I can manage without," she teased. "Besides, I can always ask you."

Her fingers disentwined themselves from his hand and, possessively, she flicked back the metal screen from the watch on his wrist, and said:

"Where did you buy yours?"

"Out East."

Saying this, he felt proud once again. If only his watch could evoke for the girl he loved the thrills and mystery of the East. He was overcome by a desire that she should understand, and the words gushed out richly, melodiously, like the song of the preening bird for its mate. Philippa listened in an enchantment. His voice and his presence enveloped her, and from time to time she forged for herself some fantastic picture of Johnny among coconut trees and shark-infested waters. His adventures formed a magical background to the obvious fact that his love was bursting into flower. His tenderness and affection were all that mattered.

When they had delivered the letter to old Eadie, instead of going back by the main road, they took the path which led to the rectory orchard by the south side of the manor house. By the time they reached the barn there was a clap of thunder, rain fell, and they ran for shelter.

Johnny showed enthusiasm for the place where Marc kept his firewood. He said it was just like one of those cabins put down for travellers who lose their way. They could live on apples and make a fire. "I wish we were on top of a mountain or in the middle of a desert," he exclaimed, "where we could always be just you and me! When it's raining, we could talk and dream."

He became very eloquent as if love had suddenly brought out all the poetry of his journeyings. How could Philippa

not have been moved by the violence of his passion? His features were still burned by the sun to a dark brick colour, and this, together with the enthusiasm in his eyes, gave him an appearance of will power and virility.

He had drawn her towards him, and she felt the touch of his hand on her knees. Her heart beat violently at this new and more acute sensation of his contact, and there passed through her a limitless submission to his will. He said:

"Why should I wait to tell you any longer that I love you, Philippa?"

The words echoed deliciously in her mind. It was her turn now to feel an immense gratitude for the marvellous thing that was happening to her, but at the same time she was seized by a panicky fear that she was no longer in control of her actions.

"We must go. We must go," she whispered. "They'll be wondering where I am."

But he only drew her nearer towards him.

When Philippa, having kissed good-bye to Johnny by the red letter-box, returned to the rectory, everything in her little world seemed utterly to have changed. He had made her promise to trust him completely in his plans for their future, and she had laughed at the very idea that he should have made her promise something which was so near to her heart. As long as she had him, the rest had no importance. Life in a mountain hut, a summer house at the bottom of the garden, or a caravan by the willows, like the one Prudy and her husband lived in—what did it matter as long as Johnny was with her? She felt drowsy, confident, drifting deliciously towards a more or less permanent state of delirious happiness.

She was scarcely down the next morning than he had found a way of spying her out in the kitchen and giving her a sprig of golden mimosa he had bought in the town. Because Mrs. Dale was in bed, Philippa had practically all the work to do, but this meant that Johnny had many opportunities of finding her alone, and his shadow began to haunt the kitchen door. Every day his respect and tenderness increased, and she was enraptured during the long walks they took together to discover how these qualities softened the occasional violence of his character.

When it was damp or cold they would return to the barn, and Johnny often chose these moments to hint significantly at what he was doing to make himself independent of his father. He was quite burnt up with a desire to be successful. When she objected:

"But, Johnny, it doesn't matter. We shall get along somehow."

He would answer:

"You're an angel, Philippa, but you don't understand that it is a question of self-respect. I must have power to make people respect me and money to give you everything you need."

Once when he was back on this subject, saying that as long as a young man had health and enthusiasm he could easily become a millionaire, he looked up into her eyes and exclaimed:

"Enthusiasm, that's the thing, both to love and to make money! Haven't you noticed how few people are enthusiastic these days?"

She smiled.

"No, Johnny, I've never noticed anybody but you."

He brushed aside this too obvious truth, and went on:

"You're too good, too naive, too confident. For your

love and mine to expand we must create the right atmosphere. I've got to make you admire me, and you must have all the things that make a woman sparkle in the world."

"Oh, but I don't need them!" she exclaimed. "That's not what you said to me the first time we were together in this barn. I just want to be . . ."

She couldn't find the word at first.

"To be what?" he pressed, kissing her hands.

"I don't know." She hesitated. "Just to love you, I think, and to be good."

"To be good!" he repeated, so moved by this unexpected word that he felt a gulp in the throat. "Oh, Philippa, I was right to call you an angel!"

He put his hands in front of his eyes as if to give himself a moment's reflection. Then he said:

"Why not, after all? Leave everything to me, Philippa. I'll make you love me more than you can guess."

During these weeks of strong emotions, of questionings and of all-consuming love, Philippa felt a desire to get closer to her father. There were moments when he looked so unhappy that she blamed herself for not being more useful to him, but mostly she wanted to catch him one evening when he was dreaming by the fire and pour out all her secrets.

Marc, too, felt that his daughter's life ought not to be wrecked because her brother had died. He was diffident, however, of approaching her, having been brought up to believe that girls came exclusively under the orbit of their mothers. Some confidences might be very awkward. The fact was that he felt terribly shy, and acutely aware of the silent hostility which Mrs. Dale showed towards her daughter.

He had never been brave enough to speak his mind on the subject, fearing, doubtless, that Mrs. Dale might turn angrily upon him, the one thing in the world which quite upset his capacity to write.

Philippa was the one to come forward. It was a cold, wet night, and the study looked very snug. As usual, she stole up behind her father and deposited a kiss on his forehead. Then she slid down on the carpet, leaning against the bookshelves, and said:

"Prudy tells me that Johnny has got Bill a job."

"Oh, I am glad," answered Marc. "It would have been terrible if Prudence had gone. Our schools are the most important thing left to us. The rest . . ."

"Yes, I know. It's almost an accident when anybody goes to church!"

They talked a moment about Bill leaving the catering business to drive trucks. It was curious, but Bill had always been a difficult, unpredictable person. Prudy was a darling. She deserved a more stable husband.

Marc turned his kindly eyes towards his daughter, and said with a wistful smile:

"And you, Philippa, have you ever thought about a husband?"

The blood rushed to her cheeks.

"Oh, yes," she answered.

This was the moment she had planned so carefully. All she need do was to let out the story in a heap, and Marc, with his shaggy hair and tender expression, would come to her rescue, for he loved her in a very special way this evening—she could see that in his eyes.

What she wanted to say, of course, was: "I'm quite different from when you looked at me last. Can't you read my secret?"

But she missed this opportunity, because the words simply would not come out. In the tiny silence that ensued she thought:

"I never have confided in him. It's not my fault. I don't know how to begin."

The idea shot across her brain that perhaps he knew more than he pretended. Who could tell that amongst those innumerable sheets of foolscap covered with his meticulous handwriting there were not other reflections than on the sixteenth century? Reflections like: "I think Philippa must be in love. She walks about as if she were in a dream, and Johnny Fairchild is always hiding behind the holly hedge."

On this particular evening, when she was so desperately anxious to get close to her father, she realised how little she knew him. Their mutual affection had never been bridged by words, and yet it was there, obvious, she was inclined to say palpable. Yes, palpable, for at any moment she could jump up and throw herself into his arms, sit on his knees, as she had done when she was small, but not once since.

When he saw that she was not going to say any more, at least for the moment, he went on:

"I've been thinking about our discussion in the garden, before poor Gregory died. Clergymen who come to strange livings should think more about their daughters. How could a young girl get married, for instance, in so many of these parishes where there are no young men of her world and education!"

He glanced up at her again.

"I'm afraid this is a case in point?"

Her lips trembled. She wanted to tell him he was wrong.

"Yes, even here," he continued. "For Gregory it would have been all right. The clergy still send their sons

out into the world better equipped than other men. The proof is so many climb to the top. Take *Who's Who* at random. Admirals, lawyers, doctors . . . half of them come from obscure rectories. But I am afraid the girls are sacrificed. I am beginning to realise it. Though your mother and I have given you an excellent education, we have so few chances to find you a husband."

"I do not need to be found a husband," she said. "I shall marry for love."

He looked at her in admiration.

"The way you said that," he exclaimed, "I know you're my daughter."

"What way?"

"A little glint in your eyes which says: 'I'm full of secrets but I'm going to keep them to myself.'"

"My poor Daddy, how little you know me!"

Though, for the moment, the secret was pressed back into her heart, Philippa felt better for her talk. She had perceived in Marc a desire to treat her as an equal. She had suddenly grown up in his eyes, and though she could not hope to replace Gregory, Marc had been proud to recognise what he thought were his own idiosyncrasies in her way of talking.

"I've prepared the way," she said to herself. "As soon as Johnny proposes I know he will be on my side."

Johnny's love became more ardent and tender as the days passed, but there were times when he was moody, and then he confessed he was thinking about the future. His desire to do something important, to make himself, as he called it, worthy of her, had become an obsession. He had returned from the war so magnificently healthy, so sure of himself, so full of ideas, and now being in love

made him so ambitious, that he was quickly impatient. Abe knew all the laws. He would often have to say to him: "You can't do that. Things have changed. We are not allowed to paint that house, or to build a new cottage for the postman, or to put a new roof over the greengrocer's shop. Be careful, Johnny. Even if you brought us business, the Government would take away the profits. The great thing is to keep going. In a few years' time things may be easier."

But what did Johnny care about what happened in ten or fifteen years? He was boiling over with energy. For six years he had believed that as soon as the war was over, he would be allowed to do what he liked. Every man had a right to make a fortune. What made him so angry was to find the mentality of those who had remained at home so different from his own. Even his parents, so glad to welcome him back, seemed curiously apathetic. The boom their little business had enjoyed at one period of the war had not lasted. The research station which at first had looked like making them so rich had become too important for the local firms. The contract for finishing it was given to a London builder. They suffered the same disappointment over the new housing estate. The local council passed them over. Steel houses arrived in sections on lorries from the West Country. The new apprentices were talking of leaving their trade to work in a factory.

Johnny tried to explain these things to Philippa, but she would answer gently:

"What does it matter? You don't need to be rich for me to love you."

Meanwhile Bill was bringing more money home every week. It appeared as if Johnny had put him in the way of making that fortune he so badly needed himself. Prudy,

on her way to the schools, always looked in at the kitchen door, and the gratitude she had for Philippa increased their friendship. What a lot of things had happened since Prudy and Bill had talked of going off miserably behind old Ganner's horse in search of work in a neighbouring town! The caravan had become the prettiest thing in the world. Bill had painted it sky blue and cream. The windows were hung with cretonnes and all the furniture was new. The bed had real linen sheets, and the floor boards were hidden by rugs more beautiful than any at the rectory.

Feminine friendships are necessarily a long succession of confidences, and often it is more fun to talk than to listen, but in this case Philippa was never tired of hearing what happiness had descended upon the caravan since Bill had started his new job. Every time Prudy described some wonder in her home, Philippa felt that it was indirectly a compliment to Johnny. Johnny was always the subject of their mutual praise. He was the one who could be counted on in an emergency.

Prudy just now was thinking about Christmas for which Bill had given her more money than she had ever had at this important moment of the year. She was therefore buying sugar plums, crackers, tangerines and dates, and one evening on her way back from the schools she discovered a Christmas tree which she triumphantly pulled up by the roots to plant in their diminutive garden in front of the caravan. "I want to keep it fresh," she said laughing, "I think when one has a garden it's only right to take advantage of it."

Thus the Christmas tree waved its dark green arms in front of the newly painted caravan. Philippa felt like crying when she saw it. There were plenty of saplings in

the rectory garden but it would be the first year that Marc would not set off, spade over his shoulder, to dig one for his family. The rambling house would be appallingly silent and with things as they were, it was no good even hoping that Johnny could come in to relieve the monotony of the long vacation.

Marc, acutely aware of the void that circumstances were creating so unjustly round his daughter, would have liked to help her, but his mind was incapable of finding a solution. Instinctively he turned to his faith which, in spite of all his faults, was deeply rooted. He would be, he must be, a better clergyman this Christmas than, alas, he had been on certain occasions in the past. Perhaps he had been unworthy of Gregory, the precious life entrusted into his care? This idea came back to him frequently. He saw, as in a film, all the most charming phases of his son's short life, how strong and lithe he had been, how modest and good looking, how quick to learn anything, how perfectly the dream of any sensitive, God-fearing father. Philippa quickly noted the zeal which Marc was putting into his work this Christmas and she decided that out of respect and affection, she would attend all his services. Even though there was nobody else in the church, she would be there to hear the prayers he said and the sermons he delivered. This would be no sacrifice on her part. The mere fact of doing what was right would give her the peace of mind she so desperately needed.

Sometimes, in the afternoon, Marc would take long walks to visit any cottagers who might be persuaded to come to church on Christmas Day. They were not always his parishioners. Strictly his parish was under water. But they were people who in years past had occasionally attended a service, and this was sufficient excuse to try to

coax them back. During these walks Philippa discovered a new charm in her father—the tremendous range of his conversation, the fact that he spoke so easily and authoritatively not only on the great men of the past, on the things they had done and the books they had written, but also on such fascinating subjects as the crops of old Ganner, the names of the trees whose branches were now bare, and the different kinds of birds soaring and swooping over the hard frost-covered fields. Once she caught herself wondering how she could be so desperately in love with Johnny whose interests were so dissimilar, but immediately she reflected that being so different was in itself a key to their happiness, that she could go on dreaming and reading while his active mind burnt a trail across the future.

Money had never been discussed in the rectory except from the negative angle. Philippa must give up her winter coat because Gregory needed this or that. Savings were in the usual order of things. Nobody had ever questioned their absolute need. Marc treated money with much the same aloofness as the cold meat and the cabbage which arrived punctually on the table for lunch. He did not like to hear food discussed. While recognising the necessity to eat, he was indifferent about the menu, and Philippa had never heard him complain. Whatever his wife or daughter produced was perfect. Making more money as a remedy to not having enough was something new in Philippa's mind. The idea showed a youthful vigour which was non-existent in the rectory, and when Johnny talked of success she could never quite rid herself of a picture of Sir Galahad in bright armour with a sword. She loved him for wanting to be successful.

What had Marc dreamt of when he was Johnny's age?

Philippa questioned him with care. Had he wanted fame? Was he very proud the day the first volume of *History of the Sixteenth Century* came out? She found him uncommunicative on these questions. He was too full of knowledge, too modest. His head would droop and his eyes close like a bird when it is ill. But he must have loved her mother as much as she loved Johnny. He still spoke of her in hushed reverence. He would say: "We none of us appreciate her enough. You must never do anything to hurt her." *We none of us*—it sounded so many people, but there was nobody left but Marc and her.

Something had suddenly happened to make Johnny feel that he was on the way to success. One evening he had met Bill in front of the research station, and Bill had told him confidentially that Mrs. Green, having amassed enough money to retire, was planning to sell her trucks, not as a fleet, but to various garages in the neighbourhood. Bill was certain that if Johnny could raise the necessary funds to buy a truck and allow Bill, who knew the ropes, to go on driving it, they could both make a fortune.

The next thing was for Johnny to persuade his parents to lend him the money. At first Abe was difficult. "Why a lorry," he queried, "when we have already got one in the yard?"

"But it's not for the firm," explained Johnny. "I want to start a subsidiary business. If I'm successful I can buy another lorry, and perhaps, before long, two or three. I've thought it all out, and I believe haulage is still pretty good. It's not that I want to leave you. I'll turn up as usual with the lads. But it will be fun, after hours, to nurse a business of my own from the word 'go.' Bill's

kept his eyes open during the last few weeks. He knows all the answers."

"I'll talk it over with your mum," said Abe cautiously.

Mrs. Fairchild was responsible for the financial side of the business. Rotund and energetic, she kept the accounts in the old-fashioned office below that part of the red brick house reserved for their private use, and she would often be seen hurrying across the yard in search of her husband or the foreman. She was very proud of the way her son had distinguished himself in the war, but it did not occur to her, more than it occurred to Abe, to retire in his favour. They were still full of strength and now, more than ever, the business required their experience. There were so many temptations, so many forms to fill in, so many people to keep on the right side of—all things Johnny could know nothing about.

The idea of helping Johnny to start a firm of his own which, if it succeeded, might gradually be incorporated into the family business, appealed to Mrs. Fairchild. Her boy would not thus be straying far from her protection. She would be able to look after his shirts and see that he ate properly. In summer he would be there to help with the garden where the peaches grew so deliciously against the south wall.

When he put his arm round her waist, asking her to lend him the money, she was not long in saying yes.

IX

IT WAS after lunch. Philippa had been ironing in the kitchen when Johnny scratched on the door. Shaking the rain from his shoulders, like a bird drying its wings, he came to warm himself in front of the stove. She saw immediately that he was the bearer of big news.

"Something wonderful has happened," he said, trying not to speak too quickly, "but when, along the road, I tried to put it into words, it didn't sound so good. Has Prudy told you that Mrs. Green is selling her fleet of trucks? It was Bill who tipped me off. Dad and Mum have lent me the money to buy one of the big ones, and Bill and I are going into a sort of partnership."

He looked at her nervously to see how she was taking the news, and went on

"I suppose you think it wasn't worth talking so big to end up by driving a truck like Bill! Socially I'm not much of a catch for the rector's daughter, am I?"

He laughed awkwardly.

"I began by being so proud. Now I'm ashamed. And yet, it's a real chance to build up a business of my own. Ford and Rockefeller started in an even smaller way. It all depends on you. I mean, do you really believe I can succeed?"

She put down her iron, and placing her head against his shoulder, answered:

"You know nothing about a woman's heart, Johnny. It isn't being poor that frightens me."

"You mean that?"

He began delving into his pockets and went on:

"If it doesn't work, I can always go back to Dad. But it will work. I've got a hunch."

He pulled out a tiny package from an inside pocket, and went on: "It's . . . it's something for you."

"For me? For Christmas? Oh, Johnny!"

She was to have a Christmas after all. Her heart beat against her ribs. What could it be?

"Is it the watch?" she asked, tearing the white paper.

"No," he answered quickly as if to prevent her from being disappointed. "It isn't the watch. It really isn't a Christmas present at all."

"Not a Christmas present?"

Her hands trembled, but she could not immediately give a name to her emotion. The wrapping paper and the seals fluttered to the floor. The form of the tiny box, the writing on the lid, increased her perturbation. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"It's a ring!"

For a moment she could say nothing else. Waves of delirious happiness robbed her of speech. She could not even see clearly. Everything in the big kitchen became hazy. Johnny said:

"Do you like it? I didn't know who to ask. It was the jeweller who suggested the stone. What worries me is the size. I tried to guess but it's frightfully difficult."

He took her hand and asked:

"This is the finger, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, smiling.

Gradually she responded to the warmth of his presence.

She was not afraid. As soon as he touched her it was like the first time, she was enchanted. Nothing else mattered. He slipped the ring on her finger. It made her hand appear quite different. All her person, in fact, was suffering a metamorphosis. She was not the same as a minute earlier. She had grown. She was something important.

Johnny, who had not been less nervous, took her in his arms, and again their lips touched, repeating the vows of the summer house. He held her so tightly that she had the feeling of being drawn into him. Her eyes were closed, and the palm of her hand was pressing against his back. She wanted this moment to last an eternity. She was celestially happy.

Then she found herself free once more, looking at the ring on her finger.

"Do you really like it?" he asked.

"It's wonderful!"

She went to the window as if to go on with her ironing. She wanted to see how the ring would look whilst she did anything so ordinary as ironing her father's shirts. Her eyes were fascinated by the bright stone. Everybody would notice it.

This reflection brought a cloud across her happiness. She said:

"How can I wear it?"

He answered:

"Turn the stone round. Like that nobody will see it. It won't be for long. Perhaps a few days. Meanwhile it will be our secret."

"It makes me feel we've done something wrong," she whispered. "Oh, Johnny, I can't hide it. I would feel ashamed."

He looked puzzled.

"Then what shall we do?" he asked.

"We're of age!" she answered. "We can do what we like."

But at heart she knew that her words were mere bravado. She exclaimed angrily:

"Oh, I wish I were an orphan! Life would be so much easier!"

The blood rushed to her cheeks. She had never meant to say that. Though occasionally her thoughts ran wild, what she had just said was a profanation. But she was angry with this false situation, angry with herself. There was something fundamentally dishonest in hiding her engagement from her parents.

The tinkle of a hand bell from the floor above filled the big kitchen with a harsh, unreal echo.

"There's mother!" said Philippa.

During the last week Mrs. Dale had recovered sufficiently to get up for a little while every afternoon. She liked to sit in an armchair by the window with an open volume on her lap. But she hardly ever read, preferring to gaze across the untidy garden at the trees in the distant orchard.

"I promised to take mother some coffee," said Philippa. "The bell shows she's impatient. You may as well give me a hand."

She took the kettle from the stove and poured some boiling water into the percolator.

"The tray's in front of the dresser," she said.

It amused her to put him to work in the kitchen. What fun it would be when they had a place of their own!

Before going up she slipped her ring round as Johnny had suggested, and seeing him barring the door, she exclaimed.

"Now you must really let me go!"

"Then pay!" he said.

And he smothered her with kisses.

She arrived in her mother's room feeling dishevelled and self-conscious. Ever since lunch, Mrs. Dale had been thinking and thinking about her son. Her grief became more poignant as the weeks passed. At the time of his death she had been stunned. Now she was realising the significance of her loss. What struck her as inconceivable was that it should have happened to her! All her married life she had thought of funerals as belonging to other people. Philippa, from early childhood, when asking: 'Where's daddy, mother?' had received a hundred times the answer: 'Your father has a funeral, my pet. Now run along and play.' Funerals had succeeded funerals in the churchyard. The ground was so encumbered that the oldest part was being used all over again.

"I've brought your coffee," said Philippa.

Then more softly:

"Your eyes are quite red, mother darling. You've been crying again. Why don't you force yourself to think of something else?"

"I don't want to think of anything else," Mrs. Dale answered sharply. "And I do wish you wouldn't take that air of commiseration when you talk to me. I *like* thinking of him. It does me good to cry."

"I'm sorry, mother."

She removed the book from her mother's lap and put the tray on the table. Mrs. Dale was clearly in one of her more difficult moments. There were times when she thought of her boy so vividly that he took shape in front of her and then, for as long as the vision lasted, she was

perfectly happy. But afterwards, if she caught sight of her daughter, she could never resist saying something disagreeable.

"What have you brought me?" asked Mrs. Dale, bending over the tray.

"Coffee. You asked for it."

"I would have preferred tea."

Philippa had taken up the cup to pour out the coffee. She saw that her mother's eyes were riveted on the hand that held it. Her heart gave a great thump. The platinum hoop of the engagement ring was far more noticeable than she had thought. She was mad not to have asked Johnny to take it off. Her face became flushed as if she had been caught stealing something out of her mother's bag. Her hand shook violently. She tried to twist the cup round so that her finger would be less visible.

"What on earth . . ." began Mrs. Dale.

She's seen it! thought Philippa. Why didn't I tell her first?

The cup slipped through her fingers and fell on the linoleum where it broke into jagged pieces.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Dale.

Philippa entirely lost her nerve. She could do nothing but gaze stupidly at the broken cup. The moss rose painted so magnificently on the transparent egg-shell china was severed from its prickly stem. The oval piece looked like a medallion. Over against a castor of the bed, leaned the handle. White and glossy, it had the shape of a tiny hoop, a doll's hoop. The cup which Mrs. Dale always used because it had belonged to Gregory when he was little, was now only fit for the dustbin. As the unhappy mother looked at the pieces scattered on the floor, her features contracted, and she said:

"I suppose you know what you've done!"

Philippa hung her head.

"Yes," she murmured. "I'm sorry."

Her mother's voice, harsh with pain, continued:

"What's the good of saying you're sorry? You're always hurting me. You do it on purpose. Anybody would think that the only reason I put you into the world was to hurt me. Don't stand there looking so stupid! You get on my nerves. Nothing good will ever come out of you!"

Sobbing, choking, her heart torn by these cruel insults, Philippa threw herself on the bed.

"I can't stand it any longer," she cried. "Every time you see me you wish I was dead. You would stifle me if you could. I can see it in your eyes. What have I done except to continue living after he has gone. It isn't my fault."

"My little girl! My little girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Dale. "I didn't mean it. Forgive me, my darling. I am crazy with sorrow. I am ill. You should nurse me. I need your pity. There are times when I even blame God for taking him so unjustly away. And yet, think of it! I am supposed to set an example to others. I am the rector's wife. But how can one submit to losing one's only son?"

"I know, mother. But if only you could spare the tiniest corner of your heart for me?"

Mrs. Dale pressed her daughter to her.

"You have more than a corner," she said.

"I'm so very sorry about the cup."

"The cup? But only a pagan would attach all that importance to a piece of china. Oh, my little Philippa, you're more precious to me than a broken cup!"

"Is that true, mother?"

" True? But you make me feel ashamed when you ask such dreadful questions."

Mrs. Dale smiled through her tears. It was the first time Philippa had seen her smile since that evening in the kitchen when they were putting the tops on the marmalade to send to Gregory.

She nestled against her mother, and said:

" We must always be like this."

Then, because she could not hold it back any longer, she burst out with the news.

" Oh, mother! Listen! Please listen! There's something important I must tell you, something I have been longing to tell you for weeks, but I have not dared. . . ."

"Tell me, child."

" I don't know how to start. . . ."

She felt, as she had once felt with Gregory, on the edge of a river, when he said: ' Go on, close your eyes, and jump!', and she would have loved to, but the water looked so cold. Her secret frightened her. It would be wonderful if her mother could share in her happiness. But at heart Philippa knew that she could not. The news would hurt her mother more than anything that had come before. But her mother must be told. They might never be such an opportunity again. Besides, she had started. Her mother was waiting, yes, just as Gregory had waited on the river bank for her to jump. So she continued, hesitating, looking carefully for each word.

" . . . it was when Gregory was ill, even while he was being buried. I don't know how. I just know that I fell in love, radiantly in love."

Then, showing her hand.

" He wants to marry me. We've made a pact with love."

Mrs. Dale's features which a few minutes earlier had expanded in affection, suddenly narrowed and hardened. If she had been able to, she would, in that instant, have taken back all the love she had momentarily heaped on her daughter's head. Had the girl gone mad? Was she telling the truth? Could she have dared allow a man to make love to her while Gregory was being buried? Philippa could see the muscles of her mother's hands contracting nervously before the breaking of the storm.

"And who, pray, has done all this to you—at such a time?"

Philippa blushed. She was dreadfully afraid of hearing her mother utter a word against the man she loved. Boldly she answered:

"Johnny Fairchild."

"Johnny Fairchild?" the echo broke out stridently. "But, my dear, though we're not rich, we've brought you up . . ."

"I know all that," broke in Philippa, swimming blindly ahead through the cold, turbulent water. "I know everything you're going to say, but I can't help it."

"You can't help falling in love with the builder's son?"

It lashed her—this insult she had tried so hard to avoid. She answered angrily:

"I didn't know you were such a snob, mother!"

"A snob? No woman in her senses would accuse a clergyman's wife of being a snob! But you can't marry Johnny Fairchild because it would be a *mésalliance*, not of class, but of something much more important, of intellect."

"Johnny proved himself big in Burma. He was a leader. And now men like Johnny are going to run the world."

"Possibly," said Mrs. Dale, "but you, and not the

world, want to marry Johnny Fairchild. What will happen when you start talking to your builder's son about the things you're really interested in!"

"What things?"

"Oh, about the books your father lends you?"

"I don't mind. When I switch off the electric light Marguerite de Valois and Fanny Burney, and Jane Austen and George Sand fly away. But Johnny's real. I can feel his strong, manly hands and his healthy cheeks. He is the sun. He is the happiness that shines to-day and to-morrow. With him I won't have to hide in a corner because somebody has a headache. Oh, I know that his hands are rougher than Daddy's. I know he splits his infinitives. I can see you don't approve of him. But I'm like a woman barrister who decides to break the law though she knows exactly what punishment fits each crime."

"Charming!" snapped Mrs. Dale. "At your first quarrel your Johnny won't stop at splitting infinitives. You'll hear words you've never heard before. And because you haven't been brought up to hear them, you'll cry."

"A quarrel doesn't frighten me!"

"Your father and I have never once quarrelled. And we're poor. Poorer than your builders. But intellectually we're on a par. That's what saves us. When I'm sad as I am now, even your father's silences are a way of showing me his sympathy."

"But, mother, one can't order these things! I'd rather die of love than wait to be an old maid. I don't want to be sterile in love, or for that matter, in anything. Intellectually I may be cleverer than lots of men. I'm proud of it. Daddy was reading me a piece out of an evening

paper a few nights ago. Some professor said that girls are proving much more intellectual than boys. Do you expect them to remain all unmarried?"

"Don't be silly."

"I love Daddy's books. But I love to put my head against Johnny's shoulder, and feel his heart beating. I love his strength, his masculine good looks, his health. I love everything about him physically. Most of the poets who sang about love were so repulsive that the women didn't want them. They were obliged to love with their brains. I don't need a brainy husband."

"That doesn't mean you must marry the first man who comes your way. Have a little patience."

"No, I'm in a hurry. Nobody goes to Daddy's church. Nobody comes to see us in this rectory. Where shall I find this marvellous husband even if I were willing to wait for him? I'm afraid to die. Since Gregory's death, I know that it can happen to me already. Well, I don't want to die until a man has loved me. I'm hungry for love, hungry."

"It's revolting!" cried Mrs. Dale. "Can you think of nothing but sleeping with a man? I blush to listen to you. You've the mentality of a harlot!"

"Perhaps," answered Philippa. "Inside me, I am impure. At night, on my bed . . ."

"Enough!" said Mrs. Dale, raising her voice. "What have I done to deserve this? I've lost both my children—one full of promise, the other selfish, rotten, vicious . . ."

Philippa put her hands to her ears not to hear the rest, and cried out:

"You have made a god out of Gregory! How do you know that if he had lived he would not have fallen in love with a waitress or a barmaid? How do you know that

already he hadn't some secret desire, some scheme that he didn't even dare tell you about?"

Mrs. Dale scorned her daughter's outburst.

She began quietly to pick up the fragments of her son's cup. Philippa watched her for a moment defiantly, but soon the shame of being responsible for the accident made her kneel and stretch out a hand towards the stricken moss rose which looked more beautiful than ever.

"No!" ordered Mrs. Dale with such authority that her daughter's movement was automatically checked. "Don't trouble, please. You have other things to do!"

Philippa ran blindly down the stairs. She had a wild hope she would find Johnny in the kitchen, but he was not there. She even looked in the garden. The rain had stopped and the earth smelt good.

She was furious with Johnny for not waiting, though she had ordered him to go. But he ought to have guessed. He should have been warned by a sixth sense. It was hateful to go when she needed him so badly.

Now she was left all by herself to think of the immense tragedy that had taken place. She had raised her voice against her mother. It was a thing she had never done before. The more she thought about it, the more she felt guilty. The fact that her mother was intolerably unfair was immaterial. Only a few days ago, Marc had said: "You must never do anything to hurt her."

She was no longer worthy of the surroundings in which she had grown up—her father, her mother, the old rectory, the services in the church with Marc standing in front of the altar in his white surplice and red hood (he was a Doctor of Divinity), the library, the big garden. Was it possible that she and Johnny would have to be married by

some strange clergyman, or no clergyman at all? That her parents would not be there to wish them happiness? She felt a burning desire to talk things over with Marc. She could manage him better than she could manage her mother. Marc would understand. He would help her if she saw him quickly, before he heard the other side of the story. She ran into his study, but he had gone, leaving his desk covered with foolscap sheets of manuscript. Where was he? Not far, obviously. Probably in the church where he wanted to put up some holly.

She took a scarf for her hair and ran across the road.

The ponies from the riding school were trotting back to the stables in a straggling but picturesque file. The groom waved to her as he passed. It was quite warm after the rain. This would not be what the villagers called a 'seasonable' Christmas.

She passed quickly through the porch and found a few large branches of holly stacked next to the font, and she guessed that Marc had been disturbed in the middle of his work. He was probably on the opposite side of the churchyard where Gregory was buried. Yes, the door by the Communion table was open.

Philippa went as far as the altar rails and knelt on the carpeted step. Sometimes, without offering up a single word, the action of kneeling down in her father's church was enough to make her feel more at peace with the world. It was never the intention that was lacking, but the power to express her thoughts, the thoughts of her 'inside heart' as the Chinese say.

Through the open door, she now heard her father's voice. Who was he talking to? To old Eadie probably. When Marc had finished his business she would walk back with him, and tell him all about it.

But in a few moments she realised that it was not to old Eadie. Her hands gripped the oak frieze. It was Abe—Abe Fairchild. Abe was saying:

"When Johnny told me you were so concerned about the buttress, I decided to come along myself. I wouldn't let anybody else do it."

"You're a good friend, Abe," said Marc.

"As if I couldn't do that!" Abe grunted.

They were quite close. She could hear the rattle of tools in Abe's bag. He was probably looking for a hammer and a chisel.

There was a pause.

Then Abe cleared his throat.

"It must be close on three months now?" he said.

"Yes, on Friday it will be three months," said Marc.

"He would be back for his holidays. He used to read the lessons on Sundays."

"I know," said Abe, "I can see him now, standing there so erect, with the light shining through the stained glass on his hair. I used to think you lucky to have him so young while mine was in Burma. Every time the postman came, I expected a card to say he'd been killed."

"I remember," said Marc.

She heard the chisel scratching the buttress. A loose stone fell on the gravel path.

"It's old!" said Abe thoughtfully.

He was referring to the stone and the flint.

"Yes," answered Marc. "Too old. It's pretty, but the people don't use it any more. The living has become so poor that in the end, I can't even pay my bills. You wouldn't believe how much I have to stint and to scrounge."

"Other people have too much," said Abe.

"When I'm gone, they'll sell the rectory," said Marc, "and then the church will go."

"The church?" said Abe.

"What else can happen to it?" asked Marc. "A church without rector or congregation? Some film magnate will pass along, and buy it for a film."

"It's not the world we knew," said Abe.

"No," answered Marc, "that's why I was so thankful for Gregory. Gregory would have taken me through the future."

"Yes," said Abe quickly, "I feel that way about Johnny. We're pinning all our hopes on him. Luckily you've got your daughter. She's become a fine young woman. The wife was saying that the other day."

"I've noticed it myself," said Marc with a touch of pride. "But a young woman is so difficult to get to know. I wish I could burrow deeper into her heart."

Abe grunted assent. Then the hammer began dislodging more stones in the buttress.

X

INSTEAD of going through the side door to join her father as she had originally intended, Philippa, after a quick prayer, rose from the altar rail and hurried out of the church by the way she had come. Before crossing the road, she looked back to be sure that Marc had not seen her. Happily he and Abe were hidden by the buttress. Her cheeks were hot, partly from a sense of guilt at having eavesdropped, and partly—it was no good denying it—from pleasure at the things they had said about her. She felt more confident of his aid, but it would have been unwise to reveal her presence in the churchyard.

Since Mrs. Dale's illness, Marc and his daughter had been taking supper by themselves at one end of the dining-room table. It was a restful, unpretentious meal composed normally of boiled potatoes with anything left over from lunch, bread and cheese, when the ration held out, and an apple from their winter store, those apples that were so very sweet under their yellow, wrinkled skins. Before serving this modest meal, Philippa would take something up to her mother. Nothing was said on this occasion to recall the violent scene after lunch, but Philippa could tell, by the tone in Mrs. Dale's voice, that she was by means forgiven. However, she redoubled her attention, and even read to her for half an hour.

Marc was a few minutes late for supper.

"I half hoped you would have come to help me with the holly," he said, sitting down. "I've done the font and the pulpit, but it wants a womans touch. I can't get it to hang straight."

"I looked in for a moment," said Philippa, "but I didn't see you."

"After lunch? I expect I was talking to Abe Fairchild. He came to inspect the buttress."

"Oh!"

She became busy with her plate. Her innocent ejaculation was so near a deliberate lie that she immediately regretted it. She asked hurriedly:

"What did he say?"

"Abe never says anything much. He's one of those men who are just naturally good but are incapable of emitting a sentiment. But Abe and I understand each other. We have a language of our own."

She looked up, hoping he would go on.

"It's wonderful having these potatoes," said Marc suddenly. "Do you think they'll last through the winter?"

"You were talking about Abe?"

"Yes, Abe. You're a little young to understand what I mean. Abe's not what I could honestly call a friend, but he's the good neighbour. I've always been able to count on him in an emergency."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"When I left Oxford I virtually severed myself from my friends. That was twenty-five years ago. Abe, fundamentally, may be a better Christian than my colleague Professor Greatheart of Magdalen, but he wouldn't be happy sitting round my fireside of an evening. If I were to read him the chapter I've just finished on

Ronsard, he would probably yawn himself asleep. Poor, dear Abe! I can't blame him! But there it is. We have many neighbours, and no real friends. I do wish I could cross the road and smoke a pipe with somebody who was rather more than a good parishioner."

"Perhaps you haven't tried hard enough?" said Philippa. "I mean, perhaps the neighbours are more interesting than you give them credit for. I'm quite willing to cross the road and accept people as they are. In fact . . . I don't know how to put it. I'm half way there already."

"You?" asked Marc.

"Johnny Fairchild has asked me to marry him."

"Abe's son has asked you to marry him?" echoed Marc incredulously.

"I'm wearing the ring he gave me this evening. Look! Wouldn't you be glad to go and smoke a pipe at Abe's house if Johnny became your son-in-law? I tried to tell you the other day, but it wouldn't come out. I've been trying to tell you ever since. I knew, deep in my heart, that you would be on our side."

"On your side? Is there anybody against you?"

"I told mother this afternoon."

Marc looked serious.

"What did she say?"

"You mustn't take too much notice of what mother says just now. She just sits and dreams about Gregory. When I butt in she hates me for getting in the way. I was so keen to tell her that I chose the wrong moment. But if you could only convince her how good Abe is, she would soon turn round. Mother would never dare go against you, Daddy."

"But . . . but you don't understand," said Marc. "I

shall never be against your mother in anything. I've always known her to be right."

"What?"

Philippa had been so sure of her victory that Marc's words winded her. She said.

"But you've nothing against Abe. You've just admitted he's a good neighbour."

"And so he is."

"But then? I thought you loved me?"

She was obliged to check herself not to add: "I thought you wanted to read deeper into my heart?"

He answered.

"But I do love you. And I have the highest regard for Johnny. But my first duty is towards your mother."

"In this case she's wrong."

"I fear, on the contrary, she is right."

"But Daddy, be reasonable. Johnny and I are desperately in love. We are sure of each other. We can be married without your permission. Why do you want to precipitate a break?"

"Anybody can do anything in life," said Marc. "You can murder. I can steal. If your mother doesn't consider that this marriage guarantees your happiness, she and I would be morally wrong to give our consent. That seems to be a proof of our love, not the absence of it. Apart from that, I have no illusion. You can be married without any difficulty at the first registry office or even, if you desire it, in a church."

"What it really boils down to," said Philippa bitterly, "is that you're afraid to stand up to mother. I just don't count. Oh, Daddy, why are you not brave?"

Marc turned away his fine features.

"Don't say anything more," he said. "Don't say anything you'll regret."

She had gone upstairs immediately after washing up the supper things, her heart so full of disappointment that she was determined to lock herself up in her room and have a long cry.

But as she looked out of the window on the landing, she saw a light shining in Prudy's caravan, and she was filled with a violent desire for her friend's company.

The evening was cold and dark with no stars. She escaped silently out of the house so that Marc should hear nothing, and stumbled across the rough field. The yellow light, gleaming behind the curtained window of the caravan, appeared to symbolise the new existence, the 'other side of the road.' Had she not said to Johnny: 'Oh, I wish I were an orphan'? Alas, her wish had almost come true. First, her mother had risen against her. Then her father. But her mind was made up. She would follow Johnny to the ends of the earth.

The caravan, picturesque and mysterious, looked like one in a fairy story. The lamp behind the chintz showed up darkly a fantastically shaped willow tree bending over the black river. The field seemed full of romance.

"But supposing Bill's there?" she asked herself.

She felt suddenly hesitant about knocking at the door. The wise thing would be to peep first through the window and make sure that Prudy was alone. She was often alone since Bill had been working on the lorries. Sometimes he would be away two nights, three nights at a time, and then come back and sleep for ten hours at a stretch.

If he was there she would go straight back.

She approached the caravan cautiously because of the

little white terrier which Bill, when he was out of work, had brought to Prudy from the town. The window was higher than she remembered. She had to stand on tiptoe to see through it.

An oil lamp spluttered on the dresser, and a cigarette, tipped with lipstick, having left an inch of ash on the back of a magazine, had fallen on the collapsible table where it was quietly burning the varnish. Diana, the terrier bitch, was on the divan, anxious, attentive, raising its head from time to time from its muddy paws. Prudy was bending over the sink retching into a pudding basin.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Philippa, "Prudy's ill!"

She flew to the door, and pushed it open.

"Prudy! Prudy!"

The stench of the caravan nearly knocked her over. Everything was so small, so confined. She hurried towards Prudy who shook her shoulders helplessly, as if to say: "Wait a moment! For God's sake let me finish!" The cigarette stub was sending up an acrid stench from the burning table. The little white dog which had jumped down from the divan, was barking and pawing her. The damp, doggy smell rose from the new carpet, swept past the smouldering cigarette, and went to join the choking odour of the gas escaping from the stove. But the smell of Prudy being violently sick was even stronger than the dog, the cigarette, the burning table, and the gas.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Prudy, bringing up her head from the basin. "Ugh!"

Her rimmel had run down her cheeks in two crooked lines which soon would meet the rouge of her lips.

"You've been poisoned?" asked Philippa anxiously.

"Thank God I came. I'll run home and telephone for a doctor."

Prudy wiped her hands on the roll towel, and said:

"It's not that kind of being ill. What the hell did I do with the cigarettes? As soon as I've vomited, I feel fine."

She lit up from the stub on the table, and inhaled greedily as she repaired the damage to her make-up.

"I must have got careless when Bill was without a job," she said expansively.

"Oh?" queried Philippa, not quite sure.

Prudence put down her lipstick and looked hopelessly round. Personally she was accustomed to seeing the frying pan on the bed, and Bill's shoes on the dressing table, but Philippa might be shocked. Everything at the rectory was so neat and clean. The entire caravan would have gone in a corner of Philippa's kitchen. But here, everything overflowed from one compartment to the other, and Prudence was always too tired to be tidy. She had always been tired by nature. She no longer made much effort to brush off the dog's fur from her jacket or to iron out the lines and pleats in her skirt. Whatever effort she made was immediately nullified by not having enough room. There was not a cupboard which took a dress standing up. There was no place where she was sure that Bill would not hurl a bundle of damp clothes. But because of Philippa's presence, Prudy made a brave attempt to tidy up. She put the pudding basin under the cold-water tap. There was only a trickle of water. She would have to go to bed without washing. She tripped up over an empty sardine tin which Diana had dragged along the carpet hoping to find a last drop of olive oil. She opened the front door—the only door—and hurled the tin out into the field. A blast of cold air pushed its way past her, into the caravan, and blew the flame up the glass globe of the oil lamp. The glass cracked, but with luck it might

last till bed-time. The wind whirled round the kitchen, putting out the flame under the kettle. The gas smelt atrocious. Prudy shivered. It was the same every time she opened the front door. She preferred the stuffiness of the caravan to the cold outside. The smells of the caravan were no different from the smells of any house, but they were concentrated. She said to Philippa:

"Kick Diana off the divan and take a pew."

But Philippa was looking at Prudy as if she had a halo round her head.

"Prudy, I know what it is! You're going to have a baby!"

Her eyes were glistening.

"How wonderful! How I envy you! This is life! This is real life! This is what I've always dreamt of!"

"January, February, March . . ."

"July!" announced Prudy, who had already gone through this arithmetic a hundred times. "July, when it's hot as blazes. What a curse! And I ask you! Where shall we put it?"

"One finds room," said Philippa. "Of course you'll have to move from here. We could ask Johnny to build you a cottage."

Prudy laughed.

"My poor darling, do you think cottages are built just like that? To begin with, you have to have a licence."

She sat under the lamp to continue consulting her fortune in the cards, adding good humouredly:

"We don't all have Queen Anne rectories."

"Johnny and I don't even own a caravan," said Philippa thoughtfully.

"That's true," said Prudy grinding out her cigarette.

"But I don't care," exclaimed Philippa. "Married

life is so exciting. Oh, Prudy! You're all changed in my eyes. When I look at you, I've the impression of seeing two people instead of one. This is nearly the most important thing that has happened to-day."

"Spades! spades! spades!" chanted Prudy, laying out the well-thumbed cards. "I keep on seeing trouble. This is the rottenest lot of cards I've ever dealt."

Then dreamily:

"I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl?"

"What does Bill want?"

"Bill's been away for three days. He's taken a load to Manchester. And when he comes back, he'll just want to sleep and sleep. Bill doesn't know yet. I thought I'd tell him on Christmas Day."

She looked thoughtfully at her cards:

"More spades. I can't understand it. I've been so lucky lately. It was money all the time."

She looked up.

"By the way, what brought you round this evening? Shall I tell your fortune? Out with your left hand!"

Philippa stretched out her hand unwillingly. She disliked having her fortune told, partly because she frankly feared the future, and partly because her parents had brought her up to be sorry for those whose lives were made miserable by superstition. Her hand remained poised over the pack.

"Snakes!" Prudy cried suddenly. "So that's what you came to tell me!"

She had seized upon the ringed finger, and was drawing it towards her.

"Oh, Prudy," said Philippa, "I must tell you all about it . . ."

She broke avidly into her story.

She talked on and on, revealing all those things she could no longer keep to herself. From time to time Prudy asked her to begin some piece over again. After that, they discussed the various words which Philippa's parents had used. Prudy's head bobbed up and down over the greasy pack of cards. The oil lamp, whose yellow flame burned unevenly inside the cracked glass, threw patches of gold on her forehead. The air was thick with the blue haze of cigarette smoke which pinched the skin, stabbed the eyes, and clung to everything, even the walls. The caravan was warm with the warmth of the stove and the lamp, of the kettle boiling away on the gas ring, and the warmth of the two women whose faces were close together, and of the dog snoring on the bed.

The alarm clock which Prudy kept ten minutes fast pointed to midnight. Philippa was no longer disturbed by the odours of the caravan. She felt a pleasant tingling all over her body. She was enjoying the excitement of being engaged. The quarrel with her mother seemed a long way off. No escapade had thrilled her as much as these stolen hours in Prudy's caravan.

"Ever since I vomit," said Prudy unpoetically, "I am constantly hungry. What about a fried egg and a cup of tea? I've got plenty of eggs. Bill brings back two dozen at a time."

"I am a little hungry," admitted Philippa. "I had no supper. You can imagine why."

Prudy delved into the cupboard under the sink where she had placed the pudding basin in which she had been sick. She brought out two plates and some knives and forks. Soon the butter was sizzling in the frying pan, and a new odour was taking possession of the caravan. They ate contentedly, and no meal had ever tasted better.

When they had finished, Philippa pulled aside the curtains and using the tips of her fingers to rub off the rivulets of heat on the window pane, tried to peer into the night.

"It's horrible outside," she said plaintively, "I don't dare go back."

"Stay here," said Prudy lazily. "You can share my bed."

The big field smelt marvellously good, and the wind of the morning blew caressingly against her hair. She had left Prudy still asleep, for she was anxious to be back at the rectory before anybody noticed her escape. Dawn was breaking uncertainly above the watery world of the reservoir, but the December morning was still dark. She breathed deeply this health-reviving air. Her face felt sticky and unwashed, and there lingered about her person the smell of stale tobacco and the almost palpable grease of the frying pan.

She let herself silently into the house, and climbed the stairs on tiptoe. Her bedroom door was open. She had been stupid not to close it in case her father had passed along the corridor. But how could she have guessed she would spend the night in Prudy's bed? She arrived back in her room as one returns to one's own home after an uncomfortable journey—a journey by train when the soot of the engine clogs one's hair and sticks to one's make-up. Her room welcomed her. It was large and clean. Her various possessions looked unaccountably beautiful. Her great idea was to have a bath, to remove from her skin all the stickiness of this strange, uncomfortable night.

Refreshed, smelling of soap, her limbs smooth and at ease in a change of clothes, Philippa ran lightly down to the kitchen at exactly the usual hour. She switched on the

lights, opened the windows wide and lit the grill to make the toast. From time to time she paused in whatever she might be doing, to look at her engagement ring. She was already so accustomed to it that her hand would have seemed naked without it. Her engagement remained the important thought in her mind. It never so much as occurred to her that anything could seriously stand in the way of her marrying Johnny.

She put the morning paper next to Marc's plate, and rang the gong. As soon as she heard his steps on the stairs, she ran to meet him. She did not want him to think that what had taken place at supper could make any real difference. But as she offered her forehead to be kissed, she saw that he looked older, more sorrowful, more pinched, and her conscience stabbed her. She said:

"You've had a bad night. I can see it."

"I've had no night at all," he said. "I waited up for you. In case you might have had an accident. In case you needed me. We thought all sorts of things. But this morning, when we heard the bath water running . . ."

He kissed her tenderly.

"... I thanked God," he added.

XI

THE secret filled her with joy and fear. Johnny had said to her.

"There's a little dance in our country town on Boxing Night—at the White Hart Inn. I'll borrow Dad's car."

"Oh, no," she had objected.

"But we're engaged. It wouldn't be good for you to spend the whole of Christmas shut up in the rectory."

"I'm not a prisoner," she said. "Things won't be very gay. That's all."

"Your father will have finished his services. He won't need you on Boxing Night in the church. There'll be no beds to make. No cooking. Your conscience will be clear."

"My conscience doesn't allow me to flaunt my happiness in their face," she said. "I couldn't sail out of the rectory in an evening dress when daddy is sad and mother is crying."

"Don't tell them. Say good-night, and go upstairs."

"I was caught that way when I went over to Prudy in the caravan."

"You told me yourself you left your door wide open. As soon as you've changed, lock it, and slip out by the kitchen. We'll be back by midnight. I promise."

She hesitated.

"You owe some things to them," he said, drawing her

to him, "but you owe other things to me. This will be our first adventure. Our first evening alone."

He had kissed her and she murmured:

"Our first evening alone! Oh, Johnny, it would be wonderful."

From a dark corner of the mahogany wardrobe, Philippa pulled out the blue taffeta dress with the pink sash. Here it was, suspended from its wood and wire hanger, bright and fresh, and full of memories of a dance at Oxford to which Gregory, young undergraduate and shy, had taken her proudly on a hot summer evening during his first term.

Shaking the dress lightly from the top to loosen the folds of the wide skirt, the perfume of May trees in flower overhanging the Cherwell, seemed to fill her bedroom. Her eyes, veiled by a suspicion of tears, remembered her brother, charmingly awkward and good-looking, introducing her to friends in front of the big marquee. Quiet, peaceful scenes imposed themselves on this one. A quadrangle, deer in a field, and Gregory's voice breaking the silence in some cloisters: 'I'm awfully proud to have such a pretty sister. Let's go back and find another lemonade.' The dress was absurdly schoolgirl. The colour exactly that of her thoughts and aspirations during this distant summer evening. Amorously she passed a hand over the taffeta. She would slip it on.

The heavy material brushed her arms and slid smoothly down from her thighs into place. The colour alternated between that of the sky on a sunny day, and the profundity of the sea. It glistened and gleamed like the blue in a peacock's fan. What sweet words had been whispered along her path! How she had blushed! How the lemonade

had gone to her head! What dreams she had dreamt! What delightful nonsense she had talked! The dress was virginal. She had made it herself after a course of dressmaking at her finishing school, and not only her mother but Marc had showered her with compliments. Her mother had been very gay that summer. She was so proud of Gregory that her joy overflowed and enveloped Philippa.

She was certain now, in all humility, that she had been the prettiest girl at the dance in Gregory's college. She had been invited for everything, even the valse, the tangos, and those hot jazz numbers which the American Army had left behind. What had happened to that stubby, spectacled young man who, according to Gregory, was so brilliantly clever? And that other friend of Gregory's who was so charming, but who danced so badly? They had flattered her with such disarming timidity! And yet . . . when Johnny came along, it was quite different. What was there about Johnny which made him so unlike anybody else?

She looked at herself in the mirror.

Of course, she had worn her hair much longer at that time. She had spent the morning at the hairdresser's. She remembered clearly every detail. And here was something else. Her shoulders had been more plumpish, more pigeon-like, and her cheeks rounder. She had been much more the 'teen girl. It was rather frightening to have lost all that freshness. The laugh and the dimple were no longer so obvious. She had danced at Oxford like a schoolgirl round the maypole. Certainly that would not happen again. She was more poised, more the young woman, still pretty, but different, and her eyes which, on that summer night, had never cried except for trivial things

like a broken doll, had since then, wept real, burning tears which change one's appearance for ever.

She missed her brother sincerely, and perhaps, more than immediately after his death. At times she was very unhappy. Then, of course, there had been all the violence of falling in love brutally, at first sight, and lately, the distress she was causing her parents. Deep emotions of this nature do not leave one the same as during the last term at school. Incidentally, she was slimmer and taller. She must take in the waist by an inch or two, and lengthen the hem quite a lot. Was there enough hem? Yes, thank goodness, she had been provident. They had always insisted on that when they were teaching her to sew and to cut. She stepped back from the mirror. She moved gracefully. "I'm not bad," she whispered indulgently. "There's something of Daddy, the part of him which smiles so nicely, but with a touch of sadness. I ought to grow old handsomely. A woman! A real woman! Not a pin-up girl, but big eyes and lots of character."

Her arms, like her shoulders, were less plump.

How becoming her ring looked when she placed her hand here . . . and then there . . . at the waist, or in front of the corsage. She was very pleased with the way she did her hair now, slightly upwards. It was much more serious-looking than a year ago.

She went through a variety of gestures in the mirror, discovering herself for the first time. She sat down in the armchair and set out the folds of her skirt. She had been doing that at Oxford when Gregory came up, saying: "I've brought your cape. I thought you might be feeling chilly." Oh, the sober little black cape she had made herself out of a long coat belonging to her mother! But the velvet was much more beautiful than anything she

could buy now. It was pre-war. She ran to the cupboard to fetch it. It was lined with the same taffeta as the dress.

And the shoes!

Where were the silver sandals which had completed her elegant attire? She undid them quickly from their tissue paper, and found them as fresh and as pretty as they were on that summer evening when this blade of grass must have caught in the heel! She slipped them on, and going over to the window, drew the curtains in spite of it being broad daylight. She was anxious to see how she would look when she appeared to Johnny on Boxing Night.

Had she heard a creak on the stairs? She was growing nervous. Softly she turned the lock in the door. It would be silly to be caught all dressed up at three in the afternoon.

Now was the time to open the curtains again, and inspect the dress critically. She was no longer of an age to wear puff sleeves. She would find something more fashionable in the magazines. She could also afford to show a little more bust, not of course, to excite Johnny, but because it was her privilege, being grown-up, to give due importance to the matter.

It had been a wonderful idea to bring this dress out of her cupboard. She was certain it would bring her luck. What was the story about the very sad king whose doctors all told him that to be happy he must wear the shirt of a happy man? To be happy, she must wear the dress in which she had been happy first. Was it not the colour of her dreams? Would it not, in some curious way, be a homage to her brother?

In a drawer of the oak chest, the bottom drawer on the left-hand side, she had put away in a white box the evening bag she had worn at this first dance. She hurried

across the room to rescue this phantom, also, back from the past. How strange to think that she had been expecting this Christmas to prove a long mortification, and that suddenly, it was bringing her inestimable joy! The thought of this great adventure would help her to be twice as patient with her mother. She would spoil her, be caressing, obedient, and read to her aloud for just as long as she asked. Marc, also, would find her more affectionate. She would listen attentively to his sermon, discuss passages from it over the boiled potatoes at lunch, and see that he never ran the risk of catching cold. For the church was cold, colder than it had ever been. There were no funds to buy the coke which an out-of-date installation devoured by the ton.

She was kneeling in front of her chest of drawers, and her hands found quickly the exact spot where the white box was hidden. She undid it lovingly and withdrew the pochette of blue lamé covered with imitation pearls. The silver strands were not tarnished, and the colour was still fresh. She took out, first, a mirror, then a comb, and finally an embroidered handkerchief smelling faintly of a forgotten perfume, and she remained thus, dreaming vaguely and delightfully of the future.

On Boxing Night, Philippa prepared her father for a lazy evening with the same affectionate energy as a mother exerts to send her baby to sleep. The fire in the study was splendidly bright, and it would have required a man of stronger will than Marc not to muse beside it with an unread book in the hand. But just in case the desire to work might suddenly overcome him, Philippa had sharpened his pencils, filled up his fountain pen, and laid out his favourite foolscap paper. During supper she carefully

avoided any subject that might lead again to her engagement. There existed between them a desire to shelve the matter over the holidays. Mrs. Dale was making good progress and would take over the household soon after the New Year. Meanwhile, though Philippa's character would not permit her to lie, she considered herself entitled to do what she wished on the understanding that, in her own words to Johnny, she did not flaunt her happiness in the face of her parents.

She effected her escape by kissing Marc lightly on the forehead, and murmuring 'good-night,' but she *did* neglect to replace the book she had been reading in the bookcase, and this could, of course, give her father the impression she was going to read late in her room. Before leaving the study, she asked: "Will you be needing anything else?" He answered: "No, thanks, my dear." He took a pride in never questioning his daughter. Whatever his faults he was not petty.

Then began the feverish and thrilling ordeal of putting on the dress she had spent so many secret hours altering. She had chosen the moment he had gone to discuss something with old Eadie to take the dress down to the kitchen to iron it. Probably Marc would not even have noticed anything out of the way if he had returned suddenly before she had finished this delicate operation, but she was none the less in a great state of excitement and nerves, and she had paused for a whole minute in the hall before being satisfied that she could run safely back to her room carrying the precious dress in her arms.

The clock in the hall had just struck eight, and Johnny, who was not likely to be late for so important an occasion, was presumably waiting in the lane. Because of the high brick wall, she could not tell by looking out of the window

if his car was in the road, but at any rate the night was warm and there was a moon. When she was quite ready, she softly opened the door of her bedroom, and leant over the banisters. Immediately beneath her was the dining-room which formed the centre of the house, opening directly on the hall. Her father's study was at right angles, but because he always liked his door to be left open, she could even, by straining her ears, hear the logs crackling in the fireplace.

She slipped the key of her bedroom in her bag, and holding her wide skirts tripped down the stairs in a whirl and a frou-frou that seemed to her loud enough to bring both her mother and father hurrying to the scene. She paused a moment at the bottom of the stairs. All seemed quiet. The kitchen, wide and low, and bathed in a clear light, was her domain. She was safe now, and took a last look at herself in the piece of looking-glass nailed to the wall. Then she turned out the lights, and let herself out by the side door.

His hand was round her waist almost as soon as the night air blew against her cheeks. But she could not see him clearly. He remained for the moment like a shadow. They flew down the lane. The car was just where she expected it would be, next to the red letter box in the wall. The door opened, and he made it easy for her to slip in with her dress billowing round her legs. She heard the self-starter and the motor beginning to purr. Then he pressed her in his arms, and gave her a long, greedy kiss.

When he released her, she was too excited to hear what he said. Probably he was thanking her for coming after all. He wanted to know how she had spent the twenty-four hours since last he had seen her. The headlights

swept the long road in front of them. The idea passed through her mind that the drive through the night was a romantic start to a great adventure.

Her eyes absorbed but vaguely the details of the long street in which all the shops were closed. There was a railway station, a bus stop, and a bridge under which there seemed to run quite a pretty stretch of stream. There were old book shops and old furniture shops with their names painted in Gothic, and on the right of the main street, through pointed arches which presumably were old, she could see fleetingly the spires of the cathedral. Here and there they passed groups of young people, mostly boys, leaning against their sports bicycles. She watched all this with a curiously detached feeling. Her one thought, her dream, was to emerge from her cramped position in the car and stand before Johnny in her evening dress. He and she were what mattered. The rest of the world was blurred.

When he exclaimed: "Here we are!" her interest became more acute.

Her first sight of the White Hart Inn was to remain imprinted on her mind, not that it was in any way superior, or even much different, to a hundred other hotels of its kind in that part of the country, but it was to provide the setting for their first appearance in public. She was to remember chiefly the animal with antlers standing life-size above the portico which was supported by white pillars. A number of guests had left their cars in the narrow space between the portico and the main road, and Johnny did the same, merely locking the doors and removing the ignition key. This point struck her because she was particularly grateful not to be left to enter the

lounge alone while he went off to put away the car. She would have felt quite panicky to find him gone, even for a moment.

The lounge was full of leather armchairs and glass-topped tables with yellow ash trays. A waiter was serving drinks to some people in evening dress. A young couple who had come from London stood in front of the reception desk. "We telephoned," said the man, "for a room with a double bed." He muttered a name and the receptionist answered: "That's right. Please sign the book." She rang for a page to take the luggage, and the visitors followed him a little self-consciously towards the old-fashioned staircase.

Johnny turned to ask:

"Shall we go straight in?"

"Oh, yes," she answered eagerly.

While he was ordering dinner, she remained demurely silent, but her mind was actively engaged wondering at what precise moment should would allow her cape to fall. When the waiter had gone, Johnny looked round the room and said something. He was nervous himself. She chose this moment to say:

"I think I'll take my cape off."

She allowed it to slip from her shoulders, and immediately she saw his eyes brighten.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "I never guessed how beautiful you were!"

She blushed with pleasure.

Modestly, as if he had referred to the dress and not to her, she answered:

"It's very simple. I made it at home."

But the big room was still cold and she felt absurdly naked. She was rather alarmed at the way he was looking

at her. She would have put her cape on again had she dared. To save her pride she started to powder her nose though it was quite unnecessary.

She blushed again as if Johnny were capable of guessing what was going on in her mind. More people came into the restaurant. The waiter arrived with something to eat but Philippa hardly knew what she was doing. She was proud and nervous. Only Johnny in this enormous room was real. She had known him in sorrow. At last they were together in music and dance and light.

When the wine butler arrived, Johnny whispered:

"I ordered champagne."

Gradually the room became warmer, and they exchanged words which made them laugh. Then he asked:

"Do you like that tune? I love it. Let's dance."

They pushed their way to the floor, and she felt his arm round her waist. Instinctively she abandoned herself as only a woman in love knows how. She was his. At his first touch her body had become supple and obedient. Their cheeks were pressed together and their steps were in perfect unison. Whatever they did physically was invariably good. This was not the nervous, polite dancing of her first ball, but the riveting of two bodies to act as one. They sped lightly across the floor, proud and certain of their destiny.

XII

AT LAST, Johnny had his truck.

The British Army had never owned a better one. He spoke of it in terms of affection, and treated it with the same excessive care as a farmer's wife, about to keep chickens, treats her first broody hen. With pencil and paper he proved to Philippa at the corner of the road one morning that by the end of the coming year, this important year during which they would certainly be married, there would be at least two, perhaps three trucks, all actively engaged in making their fortune.

Bill was to play an important rôle in this undertaking.

Johnny said that he could tell right away when a man had something in him. In all his experience out East he had never made a mistake. Bill was the sort of driver who would get to wherever he was going, no matter how many aeroplanes might attack the convoy. That was Johnny's way of putting it. He always had Burma at the back of his mind. Bill, he also said, was the man to squeeze past trouble. He had such a smile, such a way with people in the know. When he questioned a man, he would do it so cleverly—a wink, a cigarette, and always the right expression, the latest slang. He had been in England during the whole of the war. That was the secret. Nothing surprised him. Whereas Johnny admitted that he felt like somebody who had been dropped into the middle of a thick forest. He simply could not find his way about.

That's where Bill came in. When Johnny thought well of a man, he wanted immediately to place him in a position of trust. Though Bill had not paid a penny towards buying the truck, Johnny made him a partner right away. Brains, and an infinite capacity for driving a lorry, were in this case, better than hard cash. Bill had none of these modern ideas about working only eight hours a day. He was quite accustomed to going on until he fell asleep. And it needed a lot for Bill to fall asleep. He knew all the tricks—the black coffee, and the lighted match under the finger nails.

So the lorry had been polished, and Johnny and Bill had gone off on their first job together to Wales where Bill had ferreted out some business. They were to drive back on New Year's Eve.

Bill was at the wheel, and Johnny was leaning back, looking from time to time at the telegraph poles as they passed monotonously by. In another two hours they would be home, and both were well satisfied with the journey. One order was bringing along another. Everybody seemed to know Bill and want to do business with him. They had discussed freights and charges all day, and now Johnny could think of nothing better than to count the telegraph poles.

His companion was looking steadfastly at the long road in front. Bill never did anything else when he was in charge. When he said something, or even when he was arguing about a deal, he gave the impression of delivering a monologue, for his head never turned from its fixed objective. Johnny decided that in profile he was not bad looking. Though he must have been over thirty his chestnut hair, well gummed down with brilliantine, the parting



made with obvious care, grew thickly. Bill must have been conscious of this advantage for he never wore a hat unless it was necessary, and from time to time he stroked any stray wisps back over the ears.

Johnny flicked the ash from his cigarette, and said.

"Funny, the way things go. If that female hadn't sacked you from the canteen, I wouldn't own a five-ton truck!"

He looked at Bill, and went on.

"Is it true about her being sweet on you?"

"Yes, quite true," answered Bill.

This statement obviously required something more. After a while, Bill continued.

"It sounds silly to have to say it, but women . . . well, there's no getting away from it. They all fall for me. I'm what they call a favourite with the ladies."

Johnny smiled indulgently. He was so entirely happy in his own romance that he could afford to be nice to Bill. He settled down more comfortably, and said.

"Out with it, Bill."

"Oh, it's an old story," said Bill. "It began when I was sixteen. At that time I was boy usher in an East End picture house. We used to show people to their seats with a torch. You know what I mean? In the better places they use girls. But of course, I'm talking of quite a while ago."

"I never knew that," said Johnny.

"Yes," said Bill, "I still remember the films they showed. Not surprising, is it? I used to see them over and over again. I've always had a hankering to go into the film business. There's money if you know how to set about it."

That was the best about Bill. He was interested in everything.

"But it wasn't a healthy job," he went on. "I caught scarlet fever, and was sent to a hospital in the country. As I got better, I began to notice that the nurses made a tremendous fuss of me. They brought me cups of tea and buns when it wasn't my turn. They used to doll me up on visitors' day. I'd been a pretty good-looking kid. I suppose it was the illness, or the fact of spending three weeks in bed. I had suddenly become a pretty good-looking young man. The other fellows in the ward wanted to take it out of me. Instead of sulking, I forced myself to become a good fellow. You've got to learn how to do it, but that sort of thing pays. And in the end, one likes it.

"And so?" asked Johnny.

"The fellows didn't mind after that. They even did anything I asked them to. If the nurses brought me extra buns, I used to share them out. The next thing that happened was when one of the nurses was making my bed. She whispered. 'You're going to be given a half day. When Sister asks you what day you want, you must ask for Friday.' 'Why?' 'Because that's my half day,' she answered. 'As you will be popping out before me, I'll bring you the key of the flat with the beef tea to-morrow morning.'"

Bill switched the headlights on. It was getting quite dark. Then he continued in his matter-of-fact voice.

"On Friday, at mid-day, when she was handing the beef tea round, I found a Yale key in my saucer with an address written on the tab. I'd grown so tall that when I put my trousers on, they didn't reach down to my ankles. The town was a pretty dull place. I hadn't any money, and I didn't know a soul. So I went to the

address written on the label just to see what it looked like. I had to climb three flights of stairs to reach the flat, and by the time I let myself in, I was so tired I could hardly stand up. You know what it is, the first day out of hospital. Her bed looked pretty good, so I slipped into it, and before I knew what had happened, I was fast asleep."

"That was hardly a compliment!" exclaimed Johnny. "When you woke up, I suppose she had gone."

"No," answered Bill, "when I woke up she was in bed with me. Hospitals!" continued Bill after a moment. "Don't talk to me about hospitals! Shortly after this adventure, I thought I'd be a chemist. I apprenticed myself to an honest man who taught me to grind powders and to make pills, but I was allergic to certain oils and herbs, and my face and hands came out in spots. The chemist called a doctor, and I was packed off to another hospital."

Bill slowed down to swing the lorry round a corner. When the road was clear again, he said thoughtfully.

"I started to clown with the fellows like the first time. They told me things. And, of course, I used my eyes. What really got them worked up was to see the nurses come in with their big white bonnets to make the beds. When they leaned over the blankets and the sheets, showing their behinds and their black stockings, you could see the fellows' eyes popping out. Black stockings. That's what did the trick. I understand why the French *can-can* is such a riot on the halls. Most women don't know what gets a man. These nylons, I mean . . ."

"What about these nylons, Bill?"

Bill whistled meditatively.

"What women do for them. I know fellows at the

research station who double their pay by selling nylons off the ships."

"You were talking about the hospital," said Johnny.

"I've said what I meant to say," answered Bill. "The black stockings got the fellows, but they weren't much interested in the rest. When I had half days, I had all the nurses I wanted, but what's hell, is the way a woman takes it out of you, if you don't give her what she wants. And I couldn't satisfy all of them. That made for quarrels. The papers make me laugh with their damages for enticement. It ought to be the other way round."

"And then?" asked Johnny.

"One thing and another until the war. Whatever I did never came quite right. When I went for my medical I was rejected. I worked two months in a factory at Leeds, but that didn't come off either. The doctor said I must find a job in the open air. That's how I fell into hire and drive."

"Where?"

"In London. I drove American business men mostly, one in particular. From Detroit. Something to do with steel, but he spent most of each night at a bottle club in Leicester Square. I reckon I know every tree in Leicester Square. And all the houses in Brook Street. He stayed at Claridges. I'll drive lorries as much as you like, but I'll never drive hire cars again. Sometimes, when he had a party, I'd hang around till three or four in the morning. I used to get so cold, I'd go round to a chemist for a draught."

"You know London pretty well?"

"Pretty well. I kept my ears and eyes open. It's always good to know what's going on."

"And the women?"

"Oh, the women. Just the same. I only had to go into a shop for the woman behind the counter to ask: "What are you doing to-night?" Their husbands were away. Fighting. How can you trust them when they do that to a man just because he goes in to buy a paper or a packet of cigarettes?"

"You haven't any illusions about the fair sex?"

"Not about most of them."

"And in spite of that, you're married. My poor Bill!"

"That's the point. When you've experience, you can tell right away."

"What can you tell?"

"You can tell which are the ones to marry. When I first had that job in the canteen, Prudy had just come here with her mother from Coventry. She was already teaching in the girls' school. I used to see her tripping past the big gates. One evening I waited till the girls had left, to pop in. I'd timed it just right. She was wiping a lot of figures off the blackboard. She looks awfully cute when she stretches her arms up holding the damp sponge. One of the fellows in our place had his daughter in her class. That gave me an excuse. I'd worked everything out pretty carefully beforehand. It was quite a nice day and I walked back with her to the cottage where she lived with her mother. I wanted to take her to the pictures, but she wouldn't go. We talked for a little time at her door. She had a terrier bitch like Diana, the one I gave her this autumn, but older. The poor thing was blind in one eye. I'm crazy about dogs. That's why I'm so careful driving. I'm just as scared to run over a dog as a child. It ended by her asking me in for a cup of tea. I made a fuss of the old lady. I told her I would bring her some butter from the canteen. She loved a bit of bread and butter,

but the ration didn't go far. It was she who invited me to come round the next evening."

"How did you know that Prudy was different from the others?" asked Johnny.

"I didn't know," answered Bill. "I liked her, but I hadn't felt the punch in the stomach that tells a man he's clicked. That came the next evening."

"Ah?"

"Yes," Bill went on, "it was the butter I pinched from the canteen that did it. I told you about the weather being nice. The next day was real hot. Let me see now? It must have been the week before Easter. You know how it's often very hot a week before, and then cold and rainy all through the holidays? We'd smoked a cigarette or two—her mother smoked the same as she did—and then Prudy said she must put the butter away on account of the heat. She got up to go to the larder, and I thought that if I followed her I might get a chance of kissing her in the soft part of the neck. She was wearing a blouse that made her look as fresh as a daisy. I left the old lady where she was, and there was Prudy with the butter in one hand, knocking at the door of the larder with the other. I was never so surprised in my life. 'What are you knocking at the door for?' I asked. 'Hush!' she whispered, and put her ear to the grating. 'Stop kidding,' I said. 'What are you listening to?' She drew herself up and answered as solemn as an angel. 'Sometimes a mouse gets in the larder, and then I'm so, so afraid, that I knock first to give it a chance to run away!' "

Bill remained silent a moment and then said.

"It's when women are silliest, I like them best. Fancy a school marm, clever as anything, being frightened of a

mouse! And it was the way she said it! It winded me. That's when I discovered she was different to the others."

The lights of the great research station gleamed in the distance. By straining their eyes, they could see the tower of the Saxon church.

Bill, by one of those associations of ideas, to which he was prone, said.

"The old lady's buried there. She wasn't a bad sort."

XIII

ONE morning, without saying anything beforehand, Mrs. Dale came down to breakfast, and Philippa saw immediately that she had every intention of taking control of the house again. She had grown thinner and her cheeks were white, but there was something extremely fine about her features that one could not help admiring. Marc, for the first time since the tragedy, smiled as he poured out the coffee. He was so proud to see his wife back at her place at the table that when he had unfolded *The Times* he took pains to discover little items of news which he thought might interest or amuse her. He would break into his comments on world events to pass her the toast or the marmalade with charmingly affectionate glances that proved how wrong Philippa had been to believe, even for a moment, that he would have taken her side in a family conflict. She was envious to see how great was her mother's influence. She had thought, especially at the time of those long walks with her father before Christmas, that she had succeeded in getting nearer than anybody to him. Now, she seemed hardly to matter.

As usual after breakfast, she took him into the study, glancing at his desk to see that everything was in its right place, and putting another log on the fire. But she remained only for a few moments, anxious to know what her mother was doing.

Mrs. Dale was in the kitchen talking to Doris who was

washing up. The slim, pink-cheeked daily maid had remained faithful to the rectory during all the difficult months. Though she was naturally in the secret of Philippa's engagement, she had not said a word about it in the village where, in the afternoons, she helped a crippled aunt who owned a sweet shop beyond the garage. Mrs. Dale was talking about various village happenings whilst inspecting the food reserves. Her fingers were obviously happy to be running up and down the sugar cartons. She had found again a reason to continue living. Philippa's eyes turned automatically towards the window at which Johnny so often tapped. For three months the kitchen had belonged to Philippa. Johnny had come here to give her the ring. He had talked to her while she ironed, and played the fool while she made a cake for tea. Now her mother's presence seemed to fill it altogether. How she longed to have a kitchen of her own!

As soon as Doris had gone upstairs to do the rooms, Mrs. Dale asked for the ration books, declaring that she was quite strong enough to resume the shopping. "I don't need to bring anything heavy back," she explained, "except the meat for to-morrow. It will do me good to have a look round."

Every alternate week, if the butcher was well disposed, he would give them a small joint for the Sunday lunch. Mrs. Dale liked the rector to have something hot after the strain of the morning service.

Philippa felt suddenly appallingly depressed. All the morning she had waited for her mother to make some reference to Johnny. She was ready to spring to his defence. She had taken it for certain that as soon as the holidays were over the question of her engagement would have to come up. She no longer hid her ring. She allowed

it, by shining brightly on her finger, to declare that she was more determined than ever to marry the man she loved. When Doris had left the kitchen, Philippa had expected something to happen. She had powerful points to put forward which she had not had time to think of on the occasion of the broken cup. She had briefed herself like a barrister, and was so certain of winning her case that she would have liked to precipitate the crisis. But Mrs. Dale remained entirely absorbed in household matters. She talked about the Sunday joint, as if the Sunday joint could have the slightest importance at this moment when her daughter was a bundle of nerves.

"How many points have we left?" asked Mrs. Dale, running through the ration books, "I'm sure your father isn't having his porridge."

Her exclamation was almost gay.

What secret decision had she come to in the quiet of her sickroom? Was she determined to drive out her sorrow by an excess of work? Until now she had apparently found no other comfort but in her tears. Marc, by returning to the affairs of his church, by applying himself with more determination than ever to writing, had doubtless shown her a better way of forgetting. Was that the reason for her zeal in household matters? Or was she simply trying to bring pressure on her daughter? By preventing Johnny from coming to the house, she might be hoping to break the engagement.

Mrs. Dale had gone to the village with the ration books in her basket, and the weekly charwoman was polishing the dining-room floor. The house smelt of beeswax. There was nothing much that Philippa could do but peel the potatoes whilst Doris finished the rooms upstairs. What a

long morning this would be! The more time she would have on her hands just now, the more depressed she would become.

Steps along the gravel path made her look up quickly. Bert, the milkman, wearing his white overall, was arriving with his bottles in a steel tray. What had made him so late this morning? Well, perhaps that was all to the good. She would have time to listen to the outpourings of his heart. She was in just the right frame of mind to sympathise with his stories.

She opened the door to take in the milk, and asked gaily.

"What happened to you yesterday? You weren't ill I hope?"

"No," he answered, bringing out of his pocket a paper bag containing three eggs, "yesterday was my day off."

"The wife was at the factory, and so you spent it alone? Is that right? And in the evening she went to the pub, and you sat at home listening to the radio? You see I know all the answers!"

"No, miss," he answered. "It wasn't quite that. My mother-in-law kept on asking me to clip the holly hedge in the front garden, so yesterday morning I thought I'd oblige. I have to keep her sweet."

"Why do you have to keep her sweet, Bert?"

"She owns the house, miss. We're only lodgers. When your Dad married us in 1939, the wife and I hadn't time to find a house. I was called up right away. After the war, there wasn't a flat to be had. If we had a place of our own, things might be better."

"Can't anybody find a flat?" asked Philippa bitterly.

"While I was clipping the hedge," Bert went on, "a van drew up at the house next door, and two men got out

and took a lot of furniture in. My eyes fairly popped out! When they'd finished, I asked one of them what was happening.

" 'Some folks from the other side of the lake,' he answered, 'They got to know your neighbours were leaving.' 'How did they get to know?' I asked, 'I didn't even know myself.' 'I guess they were smarter than you,' said one of the furniture men." Bert snorted.

"Yes, miss, those people from the other side of the reservoir swiped them two front rooms from under my nose, and when I asked one of the men how much they were paying. 'It must be a pretty penny!' I said. He answered, 'Not so much. Only a guinea a week!'"

Bert scratched his head.

"I'm one of the unlucky ones," he said. "Still, I've got my health. The young lady in the caravan, the one who teaches at the schools, was taken bad this morning. I had to go back to the village to call the doctor. That's why I'm late on my rounds."

"Prudy? Ill?" cried Philippa. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

A pathetic expression came over Bert's features. If he had known that she attached so much importance to the school teacher, of course, he would have told her before. Puzzled, but anxious to help, he went on.

"I put the milk as usual at the door. Then I heard her calling through the bedroom window. She said, 'I'm feeling awfully bad, Bert. I haven't slept all night.' She was groaning with the pain, miss. 'It's terrible to be so helpless,' she said, 'would you do me a favour, Bert, and ask the doctor to come round.'"

"Which one did you call, Bert? Dr. Sullivan?"

"Yes, miss. He ought to be there by now."

Philippa counted the money for the eggs and as soon as Bert had gone, ran upstairs to tell Doris she was going round to Prudy's and would be back in half an hour. Bill must have gone off again with the lorry on one of his trips. It was really not safe for Prudy to be alone for several nights at a stretch in the middle of a field!

She took the short cut by the orchard, and when she reached the river from which there was an uninterrupted view of the field right as far as the main road, she could see Dr. Sullivan's massive frame rising and falling over the rough grass as he picked his way back to his car. He was the gruff country doctor whose enormous experience immediately enabled him to discover what was wrong. Thank God, Bert had gone so quickly to fetch him! Some people were really good. Kind actions came naturally to Bert with his simple, country bumpkin air.

Anxious to know what the doctor had said, she broke into a run and arrived breathless at Prudy's bedside where she knelt down and took her hand.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "What did he say?"

"I think it's going to be all right," Prudy answered, wincing, "but don't shake me."

"Is it the baby?"

"Yes, I've had a terrible night, with excruciating pain. Bert, the milkman, sent for the doctor. He says that if I stay absolutely quiet for a few ^{the} days, everything may come right. It was yesterday afternoon, playing basketball with the girls. I slipped on the asphalt. I didn't realise how clumsy I had become."

"Did you feel something right away?"

"No, I didn't feel anything. The girls all flocked round me, and we took it as a joke. It was not till ten

o'clock that instead of going off to sleep as I ought to have done after a long day, I began to toss around feeling heavy and curious. After that I had a little pain which got bigger and bigger. Then it dawned on me that I might miscarry alone in the middle of the night. When I was a student, preparing my exams at home, I could never get away from my mother and her friends who used to talk and talk over endless cups of tea. The trouble was that we congregated in winter round the only fire. After the usual household gossip, they used to talk about the women in the street—old Mrs. Jones who was having her sixth, and young Mrs. Smith who had miscarried in the middle of the night, and had nearly bled to death because there was nobody to help her. My poor Philippa, all the finest pages of English literature are coloured for me by these gruesome stories, and I can never read Shakespeare, whose plays I had to study, without recalling the gossip of my mother and her friends. I admit I got pretty panicky in the night. Thank goodness, I had Diana. If it hadn't been for her comforting little presence, I think I'd have gone crazy. As it was, I cried like a baby, and began calling mother."

"You poor darling!" exclaimed Philippa. "If only Bill had been here!"

"I'm fed up with Bill," Prudy answered bitterly. "He's never here when he's wanted. Lately all he does is to throw the money on the table, and then flop down on the bed and sleep like a log till it's time for him to go away again. It's a bit dull for me talking to kids all day, curbing my thoughts so as not to say anything they can't understand, and then coming back to spend the evening alone. The night has got to provide something more than the day, otherwise life isn't worth while. That's why I'm

pinning all my hopes on the baby. If anything happened to it, you understand, I'd just dive into the river."

"But nothing will happen to it," said Philippa fervently. "Didn't the doctor examine you?"

"He hardly dared touch me. He simply said I must keep quiet."

"And so you will," answered Philippa, "I'll ask permission to take your place in the schools."

"Thanks," muttered Prudy. "If only you knew how I'm browned off!"

"And I!" exclaimed Philippa. "Mummy came down to breakfast this morning, and now I feel pushed aside. She's taken over in the kitchen, she's gone to the village to do the shopping, and I suppose, as soon as she comes back, she'll try to find out from Doris all about me and Johnny."

"But what is there to find out?" asked Prudy. "She knows you're engaged. You told her. You even wear the ring in front of everybody."

"She'll try to discover if Johnny has been round lately."

"Your mother would never question a maid."

"All the same, she treats me as if my engagement were just a passing folly. She won't even discuss it. And Prudy, shall I tell you what's making me so utterly miserable? It's that I haven't told Johnny about what she said that afternoon I broke the cup. Nor even what Daddy said."

"You know darned well how right they are!" answered Prudy.

"Oh!" exclaimed Philippa.

"Your people haven't got anything against Johnny as a man. On the contrary, they admire him. They simply

think that in the long run you might not get along with somebody who is so different from you in everything. I can understand that because, in a way, it's my problem with Bill. He says his mates often rag him because he's married to a school marm, but you should see his spelling mistakes if ever he's obliged to write to me. Many of the little girls in my class write better English than he does. It takes a lot of love not to mind that."

"Johnny was an officer in Burma. I'm sure he writes perfect English."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure he does. I was only trying to explain my meaning. You're much cleverer than I am so you will expect a higher standard from Johnny than I do from Bill. But there will be other things that one day you'll itch to put him right on, and when that happens to the man one loves, it shows that one's beginning to love him less."

"You don't love Bill any less."

"I can be tenderer to Bill in his shortcomings than you can ever be to Johnny. Bill is what I've been used to all my life. Bill and mother got on wonderfully together. They played cards, and gossiped about the people in the research station. Johnny and your mother will never drink tea in the kitchen and crack jokes about the boys at the garage."

There was an awkward silence. Philippa asked.

"Did you fall in love with Bill at first sight?"

"Good heavens, no," answered Prudy, "I thought he was good-looking, but rather silly. He was always bragging about the women who fell for him. I think, well, on the whole, I think I was mostly sorry for him. I wanted somebody to fuss about. I was earning as much as most men of my age; that, and being cleverer, made me more

difficult to please. But in the end, one gets lonely."

"That shows you can't possibly understand about me and Johnny, Prudy darling. You've never been burnt up with love."

"But you're worried about what your parents have said?"

"Only because I'm so afraid he might get to hear about it and be hurt. I wouldn't have anything hurt Johnny."

Prudy closed her eyes.

"Philippa," she said, "do you really think it's going to be all right about the baby? I do so want it."

"I know it will be all right. I sense it."

"Are you envious?"

"Yes, of course, I'm envious. I told you the other night I was envious."

Prudy answered.

"Perhaps you better not take too much notice of what I said just now. The more we're intelligent, the more we need a man to look after us. We need their moral support. I'm a dreadful funk about the silliest things. I love Bill most when he laughs at me."

Philippa kissed her friend on the forehead.

"Thanks," she said. "I knew you'd understand."

XIV

SIXTEEN eager-eyed little girls faced the new mistress as she stood uneasily in front of the big blackboard. The classroom had oak beams, and long benches in front of sloping desks on which generations of little girls had carved their names, names that one occasionally found repeated more faintly on stone in the neighbouring churchyard.

"What shall we do?" asked Philippa, smiling.

This was a wonderful morning for the pupils in Prudy's class who felt like clapping their hands for they sensed that the rector's daughter, with all her learning, knew nothing about the curriculum. The tallest, whose pigtails were tied at the top with pink ribbon, answered with the assurance of her nine and a half years.

"Please, Miss Dale, Monday morning is the scripture lesson."

Philippa turned to the immense blackboard which occupied nearly all the wall at the back of her desk. The lessons of the previous week remained in the order they had been given so that the children could recapitulate at a glance the progress from Monday to Friday. Prudence usually wiped the blackboard clean on Monday morning, but Prudence was still in bed in her caravan where, happily, she had become quite reassured about the future of her baby.

Philippa's eyes travelled past the additions and the subtractions and "the capital of Scotland is Edinburgh" to

the notes Prudy had chalked up a week ago at this hour. And she answered for the benefit of the class:

"Yes, that's quite right. I ought to have noticed."

There was a satisfied stir among the little girls.

They liked Philippa because she was modest and gentle, and they respected her because she was the rector's daughter, but they had already been obliged to come to her help, and it was exciting to hear her admit it. A big stove, with a fender all round it, stood in front of the window on the other side of which snow was gently falling. The puddles in the road were covered with ice which had cracked when cautious toes had been thrust through it. A row of diminutive rubber boots and goloshes sent rivulets of melted snow trickling between the roughly joined floor boards.

Philippa tried to recall the various instructions which Prudy had given her, but she was intimidated by the sixteen pairs of eyes following her slightest movement. Where did Prudy keep the damp sponge and the chalk? It would be better for her prestige if she were not obliged to ask, but her indecision was causing arms to move and feet to rustle. She looked nervously round—from the text *I am the Good Shepherd* written right across the top of the blackboard to the large but very worn globe next to her desk, and the table of weights and measures hanging beside the window.

"Please, miss, shall I wipe the blackboard clean?" asked the little girl with the pigtails.

"Do you generally?" asked Philippa.

"Sometimes," came the answer, but other voices said together: "Generally it's Miss Prudy."

Already Philippa's self-appointed aid had gone straight to the sponge. Now she saw where it was kept, she took it from her and declared:

"I think I had better do it myself."

She stretched up to efface the lesson of the previous week. Prudy had written in large letters: *David was made king over Israel.*

"Is that where you've got to?" asked Philippa.

"We had that last week!" came a chorus of shrill voices as the children turned the pages of their storybooks. This time it's Absa . . . Abso . . ."

"Absalom," said the little girl with the pigtails. "Shall I find you the page, miss?"

Philippa sent her back to her seat.

"No," she answered, "I can manage. What was Miss Prudy going to tell you about Absalom? The story of the oak tree?"

"If Miss Prudy reads to us, we're allowed to do cross-stitch," said somebody.

"Where is your cross-stitch?"

"In the cupboard under your desk, miss."

"Well, hurry. You've wasted far too much time already."

The pupils rose together and made a concerted rush for the cupboard, where they sorted out their various pieces of work. One of them whispered:

"There are mice in here."

"I'm not in the least afraid of mice," said Philippa, "and, besides, they wouldn't come out in daylight."

"We saw one once. Miss Prudy yelled."

"Will you go back to your places immediately!"

She was beginning to find her authority. She liked telling stories. She would have no great difficulty in keeping the girls interested for half-an-hour, for the story of Absalom, though so very sad, was one of her favourites.

As soon as the room was relatively quiet again, she sat down at her desk and said:

"Miss Prudy has told you how the men of Israel went to David and said: 'We will anoint you to be our king.' Now his son Absalom rebelled against him. But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him."

As she quoted these words from memory, she became aware that her eyes were glistening, and that the blood was colouring her cheeks. This magnificent young man was too much like the one who was always in her thoughts. She was telling her story with such enthusiasm and with so beautiful a voice that the older girls looked up from their sewing. They had become inspired like her. Their imagination represented a young warrior, chivalrous and infinitely good-looking. Then Philippa described how the king's son, riding on a mule, was chased by the servants of David through a wood, and how the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and Absalom's head was caught up in the branch, and his body swung between heaven and earth; and the mule that was under him went away.

"Did he die?"

"Not immediately; not until one of David's captains, contrary to the king's orders, thrust three darts through his heart as he hung in the tree."

A rustle went through the room.

"And the king was much moved," Philippa went on, quoting again from memory, "and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, thus he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!'"

She put a handkerchief to her eyes because they were moist.

There was a pause, and then the door opened and Johnny

put his head nervously in. The sixteen little girls looked up at him and gaped as if he had been an apparition. Tall, and fair, and broad-shouldered, he was beautiful against the dark oak, and, like Absalom, from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.

Then, because it was the rule in class when somebody came in, all the little girls got up.

Philippa turned quickly round. She had not seen him come in because she had her back to the door. He had arrived hungry for her presence, drawn like a butterfly to the flower. He hesitated, not daring to look at the little girls, and then hurried to Philippa, trying to pretend he had something important to say.

"I heard from Bill. I couldn't believe it was true," he said. "I'm sorry. I ought never to have come."

She murmured:

"No, you shouldn't have come. You'll get me into trouble."

She smiled at him, and he went away almost on tiptoe.

"You may sit down," she said to the girls as soon as the door closed. "Where had we got to?"

"Absalom!" answered all the little girls together.

Johnny walked off across the snow, absorbed in the picture of a new and even more enchanting Philippa. Hitherto he had seen her in the low Queen Anne kitchen of the rectory, or under the pale winter sun in the lanes. Now he had found her in the romantic setting of the panelled school, inspired and virginal in front of a crowd of eager, bright-eyed children.

"I can't wait any longer!" he muttered.

He hurried back to the yard, where he found Mrs. Fairchild laying the table for lunch. He took her in his arms

and kissed her with such effusion that she could hardly believe her good fortune, and exclaimed, full of happiness:

"What on earth's the matter with you, Johnny?"

"Mum," he exclaimed, releasing her, "haven't you noticed anything funny about me lately?"

"I hardly see enough of you to notice anything funny," she answered, pouting.

"Look at me again, Mum!"

"You'll make me late for dinner."

She remained for a moment with the forks and spoons poised in mid-air while she scrutinised her good-looking son.

"Well," she said, "you look the same to me."

"I'm in love, Mum!"

"Good lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Fairchild.

She was thoroughly interested, and asked:

"Who is it, Johnny?"

"Guess!"

"I don't know. I can't guess. Except . . . No, it couldn't be."

"Except who?"

"I just remembered something that struck me the other afternoon, but I'm silly."

"Say!"

"The rector's daughter had such a look in her eye when she asked for you."

"That's right, Mum!"

"You're in love with Philippa Dale?"

"We're engaged."

"Engaged! And you didn't tell me!"

"We wanted to keep it a secret at first. Aren't you saying anything, Mum? What do you think?"

"She's a nice girl. I like her. I always knew you'd

pick on a girl I would be proud of. But I wasn't expecting anything yet, not really. Oh, Johnny, it's exciting. Tell me about it."

She sat down, out of breath, on the couch, under the coloured print of *The Gleaners*, and her eyes were wide and watery with pride.

"She's an angel, Mum. You can't imagine."

"How do you mean: I can't imagine! I remember the day she was born. They were all so upset because she wasn't a boy, but I said: 'Mrs. Dale, she's going to be as pretty as a flower.'"

"You certainly proved right, Mum, but it's funny, I didn't notice anything until I saw her again this autumn. We went to the edge of the reservoir together. She turned dizzy, and I took her by the hand. And then . . . well, something strange happened. I felt quite a different person."

Johnny bent over his mother and said:

"We haven't told her people yet. We've been sort of nervous. Now I've told you, I can tell them."

"Of course you can!" exclaimed Mrs. Fairchild.

"Of course you can do what?" asked Abe jovially, coming into the room.

"Oh, Abe!" Such news! Johnny's going to be married!"

"I'm blowed!" said Abe.

He looked at his son and asked: "Who's the girl?"

"Oh, Abe," broke in his wife, busying herself with the plates, "you'd never guess! No, not in a million. He's going to marry the rector's daughter!"

"What!" said Abe, on whose face a cloud had suddenly appeared. "I've just come from there. Mr. Dale didn't say anything about it."

"But he doesn't know yet!" said Mrs. Fairchild.
"Johnny's told us first. It's a secret."

She went into the kitchen, calling after her:

"You can both sit down. It's boiled beef and carrots."

"Supposing they don't like the idea!" said Abe gruffly, as he sat down and cut himself a slice of bread.

"I'd have told the rector already," said Johnny, "but they've all been so upset about her brother's death. Besides, between you and me, Dad, I wanted to wait till I could cut a better figure. That's why I was so keen to buy the truck. Like that I've got a business of my own."

"One truck ain't a business!" declared Abe.

"I'll make it grow," said Johnny. "Meanwhile I thought perhaps you and Mum could help us set up house."

Mrs. Fairchild came back with the food.

"Your favourite dish!" she said, "and dumplings made with white flour!"

While she carved the meat, Abe seemed to be thinking hard. After a while he said gravely:

"I don't want you to be disappointed, my boy. Your Mum and I gave you all the money we had liquid in the bank."

"But the business?" queried Johnny.

"It's mortgaged!" said Abe bluntly.

"He doesn't need so much money to marry a girl—not with his looks!" declared Mrs. Fairchild.

"Listen, Mum, it's not that *she* wants money. She'd live on a desert island. Besides, her people haven't got a bean. But I've got pride, Mum. I'm not your son for nothing. I want to walk into the rectory, and carry her off with a flourish!"

"I thought during the war we were going to make a lot of money," said Abe. "But we couldn't get any labour. Now, if you'd been here . . ."

"He did better by going," put in Mrs. Fairchild. "He made something more important of himself there than he would ever have done here. Besides, there was the glory of it."

"I don't say the contrary," said Abe, "but the firms from London came to take the contracts from us, and afterwards, when we had a bit more labour and when Johnny was back, there wasn't the business any more."

"All those restrictions . . ." said Mrs. Fairchild. "But that doesn't mean that with patience we won't work the mortgage off."

"Yes," agreed Abe, "we'll do that, I hope."

"You could always bring her here till you found a flat," said Mrs. Fairchild, pursuing an idea. "Perhaps I ought to call on Mrs. Dale. What do you say, Abe? Should I call on Mrs. Dale?"

Abe munched meditatively.

"I don't know," he said. "It wants thinking over."

"Perhaps if the buttress isn't finished, you could slip a word to the rector," said Mrs. Fairchild, who was anxious to forward the interests of her son, "casually, when he comes to see how you're getting on?"

"I might do that," answered Abe.

"No!" put in Johnny forcefully,. "It would look as if we were nervous, and we're not nervous. Philippa and I are in love. She's got the ring. Don't worry about the money, Dad! I'll make it myself, and when I start splashing it around, the rector's eyes will pop out of his head!"

Abe laughed. Then, contentedly:

"This is a nice bit of salt beef, mother. I wouldn't say 'No' to a second helping."

XV

AFTER lunch Johnny lit a cigarette and walked thoughtfully in the direction of the town. He felt better for having taken the old folk into his confidence, and on whole it had gone well, but this was only the beginning. He had entered the phase of big decisions and rapid action. He had never been so much in love.

His thoughts at this moment were extremely complex. Though he had not yet approached the rector and his wife, he foresaw no great trouble from this direction. The Fairchilds had always come to the help of the church when the rector was in trouble, and though it would not be right to turn such matters into a profit and loss account, the rector on the whole was in Abe's debt.

But, as Johnny had pointed out to his father, there was something which worried him a great deal more than ringing the front door bell and telling Marc Dale officially that he was going to marry his daughter. He wanted to cut a dashing figure, not only to hold his head up proudly in the slightly intimidating atmosphere of tobacco smoke and learned books which characterised the rector's study, but because he wanted to be rich enough to start a new and much more exciting life with Philippa.

Johnny's years out East had given him a new conception of a young man's possibilities. The horizon, instead of being the next town, was beyond continents and oceans. The idea of bringing a young wife to live above the building

yard, under the parental roof, was just out of the question. And supposing, which he did not seriously believe, the rector and Mrs. Dale were to ask the young couple to come temporarily and occupy a part of their rambling domain, the answer would be just as definitely in the negative. A tender, exclusive, poetic love like theirs could never flourish in such a sepulchral and oppressive place. In Burma, Johnny had picked up a service edition of O. Henry's short stories, and they had made him dream of skyscrapers and cactuses, of city brokers and ships on the ocean, but what it really all boiled down to was that Johnny wanted to use his brains to make a lot of money. And, as we have already seen, everything in the country to which he had returned after the war seemed to be arranged with the exact opposite in view, that is, to prevent a young man with imagination from building up the fortune to which, by all the laws of equity and sense, he was entitled. Thank goodness there is always an opportunity when a man knows how to seize it.

Bill was Johnny's opportunity.

Yes, any other man, any man less determined than Johnny, would have been singularly depressed by the news that the family business was mortgaged and that he was entirely without expectations. What was the use of Abe's goodness, his generosity towards the rector, if he could not even prevent his business from taking so serious a turn? He was old-fashioned, he was out of touch with the present, as the rector himself was nothing more than a very dreamy person in his Queen Anne rectory. But see how powerful is nature which chooses such an unlikely spot to grow the tenderest and most beautiful flower in all its garden! Johnny had no sooner seen this flower than he had picked it. He was like the explorer, who, having discovered a rare and magnificent orchid on a mountain, is merely

worried about the best method of carrying it home. He is no more repentant about picking it than Johnny was of taking Philippa from her parents.

Bill was Johnny's opportunity.

Bill had made him buy the truck which was already starting to make money. Bill had said: "Don't worry about giving me a salary. You said I was a partner. Am I a partner?" Johnny had answered: "Sure, you're a partner." "Very well," said Bill, "at the end of each week we'll split the profits fifty-fifty."

Johnny liked a man to talk that way. A man like Johnny, who had found a soul of his own out East, who had seen fringes of our Empire, or what until successive governments had given it away had been an Empire, was not going to drive a lorry unless there was something more in it than an uninspiring salary! Great men had been gamblers at the beginning. Johnny, who could not hope to impress Philippa by his erudition—O. Henry and Graham Greene were the only authors he had ever read—could get his own back by showing her the many wonders of the world. She was different from any other girl he could have married, yes, different because she was not merely lovely to look at, but almost saintly. When he saw her in front of all those little girls in the school he could have cried. Saintliness was an appreciable virtue to-day. It was an edelweiss one must climb into the rarefied atmosphere to find, across torrents and glaciers, far from where normal men and women live. He had seen enough of the world to appreciate this quality. Only common, stupid, frightened people laughed at it. Johnny had never been afraid of being laughed at. That was why he had the reputation of being brave.

Bill was due back from Cardiff. With any luck he would

be in the garage now looking over the truck before he went to get some sleep at home. Thank God, he was such a wonderful driver! One could be sure with Bill that he would respect £3,000 worth of steel and engine, and not go and pile it up against a refuge. If ever the truck was put out of action, the chance to make a fortune would disappear. One could never get anything mended these days.

Johnny needed to have a real man-to-man talk with Bill. He was quick, and would understand everything, and though he was slightly bombastic he appreciated women. That was rather an endearing trait in his character.

The clock above the fountain was striking three, and the narrow High Street was crowded. Johnny had quickened his pace. He enjoyed the feeling of swinging so elastically through the slow-moving mass of basket-carrying shoppers. It was good to be young and brimming over with health, still tanned from the tropics, and filled with powerful resolutions. He felt like a young god whose superior state made it unnecessary to worry about the small things which occupied the minds of the people about him.

Here was the Crown Inn. Next to it, Featherweight's the saddlers, and now the Central Garage where Bill and he kept the lorry.

He saw it immediately. How powerful it looked! How massive the tyres which so lately had been tearing across the snow-covered highway. It was theirs! They owned it! How stupid those people who pretended you could run a world without the fun of owning things.

"Hullo, Bill," he said, as he caught sight of his partner.
"Been back long?"

Bill wiped the oil from the tip of his nose and answered:

"Thank God you've turned up! I've been trying to get you on the 'phone."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, only there's a woman in West Street who wants us to take her furniture to Liverpool. She's moving."

"So what?"

"I'll give you a hand to load the stuff, and you can be in Liverpool by seven."

"To-night?" exclaimed Johnny.

He was thinking of Philippa. After school they would have gone all round by the Manor House sinking their feet deliciously into the snow, which by now must be quite thick in the fields. They would have their evening kiss, the best one of the day, in the orchard. Night would be falling. They would be away from the crowd. Nobody could disturb them.

Bill was looking at the electric clock.

"The pubs are closed," he said, "and anyway, I'm too darned tired for beer. Let's go and have a cup of coffee at the milk bar in Bear Lane."

Bill dragged his friend out, and they turned down the narrow, cobbled street. A fried-fish shop was sending up clouds of pungent steam through a fan in the window.

"What's the hurry?" asked Johnny.

"You'll be back by half-past five in the morning," answered Bill. Then, maliciously: "Afraid to lose your sleep?"

Johnny winced.

"Say that again!" he said.

They were facing each other almost angrily on the steep and deserted pavement of this back alley while the snow fell lazily in big flakes.

"Look!" said Bill suddenly. "What's urgent is the excuse to go to Liverpool. It all fits in like a crossword puzzle. Old Ganner wants barley and corn for his poultry.

The hens aren't laying. You'll come back in the night with grain, and I'll arrange for him to leave the gates open. You can drive straight in."

"At five in the morning!"

"Before the farm hands turn up. He stores his barley and corn in cider vats."

"But it's . . .!"

"It's what?" asked Bill quietly. "It's none of our business what he does with it. Do you feel like teaching old man Ganner his business?"

"When did he ask you for the grain?"

"The other day."

Bill took a pencil stub and a piece of paper from his pocket, and added:

"Here's the address where you take the furniture to, and this is the yard where you'll load the grain."

He held the paper out.

Johnny hesitated.

"Come on," said Bill. "We'll have a coffee, and I'll give you a hand with the stuff in West Street. She says it isn't very bulky."

They went where the lights of the milk bar shone at the bottom of the street, and, entering the narrow room, they chose a table at the far end.

"Two coffees please, miss, and twenty cigarettes."

"What I can't make out," said Johnny, "is how you fixed up this business with old Ganner. You didn't tell me before."

"With Ganner?" repeated Bill. "But what's so funny about it?"

"If there wasn't something funny about it, we wouldn't have to deliver his barley and corn in the middle of the night!"



"Do you think Ganner takes a loud speaker with him when he delivers his poultry and eggs at the research station? And the cream and the butter! I ought to know."

"I suppose you ought. But old Ganner? He's the richest man in town. Isn't he afraid?"

"Are you afraid?"

The query was so unexpected that Johnny had to steel himself not to betray his surprise.

"Nobody has ever said that to me before!" he answered.

"I didn't mean it in a nasty way," said Bill. "I mean that if Ganner's the richest farmer hereabouts, he'd probably be out of business by now if he couldn't get enough to fatten his poultry and his beasts. There's nothing wrong in a man pursuing his normal business, I suppose? It's as if you prevented a baker from baking bread!"

"Or a builder from building!" said Johnny. "But that's what does happen."

Bill laughed, and offered his friend a cigarette.

"My throat's like a speedway track!" he said disgustedly. "Waitress, the bill, please."

They walked silently back to the garage.

Bill was almost asleep. From time to time he gave a little jerk and opened his eyes. He was too tired for the coffee to have much effect. His cigarette had gone out and hung limply between his lips.

Johnny, on the contrary, felt amazingly moved by the prospect of this nocturnal adventure. He had never been to Liverpool. The idea of driving the lorry into this gigantic port on the Mersey, this city so heroic during the war, so romantic in its associations of ocean travel, delighted him.

He loved to visit cities for the first time. Ports, especially, made him dream.

What he was going to do in Liverpool sent a little flutter up his spine. It was mysterious and slightly dangerous, like the special missions for which, in the East, he had so often volunteered. He was not doing anything specifically wrong, not himself, but old Ganner probably was, and he was therefore in the position of a man brushing up against something picturesque and evil, like opium running. To have refused this trip would have been to make himself ridiculous in Bill's eyes, and incapable of making the fortune he simply had to make if he was to marry Philippa.

Already he had allowed Bill to do more than his share of the work. Bill had gone to Cardiff, and was also going to help Johnny load up the truck in West Street. Before Bill could go home he would have to look in at Ganner's farm to tell him about to-morrow morning. How would old Ganner come down to meet Johnny at five o'clock? Johnny suddenly pictured the red-cheeked farmer wearing a night-cap and holding a spluttering candle. Why had this absurd thing crossed his mind? He laughed, and because, as they arrived in the High Street, the wind blew colder he turned up the collar of his overcoat and, nudging his companion, said: "Wake up, Bill; here we are!"

The truck was loaded, and Johnny was at the wheel. The snow had stopped, and it was nearly dark.

"Drop me just beyond the bridge," said Bill.

He was straining his eyes to see the lighted window of the caravan. Prudy would be there waiting for him. And Diana. The terrier would bark as soon as she heard his step. Inside, it would be warm. There would be bacon

and eggs. Then he would undress and slip into bed with Prudy.

The truck pulled up against the hedge and Bill dropped silently on to the shining bank.

"Good-night!" he said. "I'll run across to Ganner's right away."

"Good-night, Bill!"

Johnny slipped into gear and the heavy machine started off again. But not quickly. Johnny felt a lump in his throat. His adventure suddenly promised to be less of an adventure than he had thought it would be an hour ago. Nothing seemed worth while any longer if Philippa wasn't there to share it. He looked towards the rectory and had a furious desire to leave the truck and run as far as the kitchen, but he knew what happened to trucks which drivers leave, even for a moment.

Instead, he slowed up and gave three long hoots, and then another three. By putting his head out he could see over the holly. There was the kitchen window! A hand moved the curtains, and a beam of light shot across the snow-covered field. Now it was replaced by another, wider beam. The door had been opened and somebody was obviously looking up and down the lane. He felt happier now. She loved him. She must have sensed his presence. He gave a triumphal last hoot, and went off on his journey to Liverpool.

XVI

THERE was going to a wedding at the church—Alf, a former Bible school lad of Mrs. Dale, with Lily who, with three of her sisters, worked as a waitress at the Research Station—and this event immediately became the great, almost the only subject of conversation at the rectory.

For Marc and his wife it was a symbol, a symbol that the church was everlasting, that the Bible class lad of yesterday had grown up and going to marry a girl of his own world, and that presumably they would have children who, in turn, if they were of the male sex, would go to Mrs. Dale's Bible class and possibly sing in the choir.

It was such a long time since there had been a wedding at the church.

This had been the depressing part of Marc's ministry. Every few weeks he was called upon to bury some aged parishioner, one of the members of his dwindling congregation, but he had almost forgotten what it was to look forward to the future, to build up the church of to-morrow.

At every meal Philippa heard something new about Alf and Lily.

She even heard about them at school, where she was still carrying on for Prudy. Lily was the fourth of ten children. The girls went to the church schools and then became waitresses at the Research Station. The boys became plasterers or carpenters at the same place. Two of Lily's small sisters, and one of Alf's, were in the class which Philippa

had momentarily taken over from Prudy. They wore their hair in pigtails, and had bows of bright, artificial silk.

Mrs. Dale was not interested in Lily, but in Alf. Girls had no place in her thoughts. They got on her nerves. But her Bible class boys remained her boys for ever, even when they emigrated, as they occasionally did, to sheep farms in Australia or New Zealand. She wrote them chatty letters and sent them magazines, and they even found time to write to her.

Alf's family had been in the village always, or as long as anybody could tell. His forebears would have served the Hallendyces. Lily's family had arrived from the East End during the Battle of London. They stayed after the war because of the Research Station, which gave work to everybody. The eldest of the girls had children of her own who would soon be ready to go to Prudy's class. Lily, dark and stubby, was just twenty. Of a happy, quick disposition, she could have been seen hurrying about the Research Station canteen, a plate of food in each hand. She wore rubber heels for economy, with the result that as she tripped from table to table, only the soles were audible, making flak, flak, flak on the hard floor.

She was to be married at 10 o'clock on Saturday in white with a veil.

All the waitresses and many of Alf's mates from the Research Station would be there, having arranged in advance for time off. The church would be full. There might not even be room for all the people anxious to come. The rector and his wife could not fail to feel satisfied.

Behind this joyful wedding, however, there was a pitiful picture.

Alf's mother, still quite young, had cancer of the brain. The doctors had discovered it just after her fortieth birth-

day, when she should have been in the most beautiful period of her life, and she had wept under the shock. She tried to discover some reason for what appeared so horribly unfair. It might be because her son was working at the Research Station, whose only reason for employing so many people was to perfect an atom bomb which was to kill not by hundreds, but by thousands, in a future war.

She had been wrong to let him work there. But when she heard people talk about these terrible inventions she knew, deep in down in her heart, that they were nothing compared to the speed and efficacy of the monster which was gripping her by the throat, sucking the lifeblood out of her veins. If only it could have been something else, like consumption, which modern drugs such as M. and B. or penicillin, had learnt to cure! But from this terrible thing which tortured her there was no escape. It was worse than to be hunted by wolves, for there was no sporting chance. The killer was sure of his victim. And when she looked at her son she knew what she was handing down to him. She guessed how on winter nights in years to come he would be haunted and pursued by the same killer that had tracked her down. He was twenty now. He looked a beautiful bridegroom. But when he turned that dangerous age of forty, which is really still so young for anybody who, like her, is full of an insatiable desire to live, then . . . Oh, God! the first time he had a pain, a curious pain, the doctor would ask, "What did your mother die of?" and he would have to answer: "The plague, the curse, the atom bomb!"

It might have been better for the young couple to wait, but Dr. Sullivan, though knowing the end must come, could not tell exactly when. And the youngsters were in such a hurry. They had their lives to live!

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Dale to Marc one afternoon at tea, "I have just been to see the poor woman. Since . . . what happened to us, my dear, I feel I understand better the suffering of others. It's terrible for the boy. When he sees his young wife in white on Saturday he's sure to realise that she will soon be in crêpe. I don't believe the mother has a month to live."

Mrs. Dale was full of compassion for the tragedy hanging over her Bible class boy. She would have liked him to be happy on his wedding day. This marriage was after her own heart. It was the sort of thing she dreamt of in an ideal parish. She understood now the full, terrifying emptiness left by death. Alf had always been fond of his mother, who was too young, too pretty still, in spite of the large family she had brought up, to be taken away.

Yet, in appearance, at any rate, Mrs. Dale remained adamant in what concerned the drama under her own roof. Philippa's romance cast a shadow on everything, but nobody talked about it, the parents because they considered her stupid, and Philippa herself because she was becoming every day more silent and stubborn. Philippa could not move without imagining Johnny at each turn. If she poured herself out a cup of tea, she saw him at the bottom of it. She tried to make the tea leaves tell a story. In the morning, on waking, she sought to interpret her dreams. Johnny was in all of them. She might have resorted to cards if she had known how to read them. She imagined all sorts of things. She saw herself in Lily's place, wearing Lily's white dress, walking up the aisle, listening to the wedding march, carrying the bouquet of white flowers. It was as if Lily's wedding was Philippa's in the looking-glass.

"Poor boy!" continued Mrs. Dale, referring to Alf,

"he was sobbing when he let me in. We must try to make his wedding all the happier because he will soon, probably, be crying. I was right to face the world again. To begin with, I can help people better, knowing what they feel, and secondly, I can bear my loss easier when I see how unhappy other people are."

Marc put a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"I think you are very brave," he said, "and quite right to do what you are doing."

"It's funny," she answered, "I found myself telling that boy all the things I never believed in when you told them to me, comforting things, I mean, that God takes away the people we love, to try us."

"That's right," answered Marc.

"Though it is not quite the same. Gregory was a mere boy, whereas that poor woman, though she's comparatively young, is married and has children. At least she has had a taste of life, hasn't she?"

"That's certainly something!" put in Philippa, getting up and walking nervously towards the window.

Her voice cut the air of the study harshly. There was a pause, and Mrs. Dale, addressing herself again to her husband, said:

"It's an excellent marriage. I bless it with all my heart. They are splendid folk, and made for each other. How very good-looking Alf has become! I hope I'll live to have the children in my Bible class."

"Isn't this wedding making you unusually sentimental!" asked Philippa. "What is so wonderful about the young man?"

The enthusiasm her parents showed for him was more than she could stand. Yes, what was wonderful about him? That he was a plasterer at the Research Station?

That he was going to marry a waitress? These misplaced compliments revolted her. Sometimes the conversation of her parents made her wonder if they were really as intelligent as she had been brought up to believe. What had come over them? This entirely unmerited praise for Alf was certainly out of place when Johnny, brilliant, ambitious Johnny, was passed over in silence.

She had stayed at home too long. That was the truth of her sadness. Her parents were entirely occupied with their job. The parish was their job, and Lily and Alf were part of the parish.

She looked fixedly out of the window, no longer listening to what her parents were saying. She did not want any tea. She did not even care if they thought she was rude. Up to now she had been careful not to hurt their feelings, but it was a waste of time. She did not count at all.

She was very bitter with Johnny.

Why didn't he hurry? When was he coming to snatch her out of this dismal existence? Her parents were starting a new life. They had recovered from Gregory's death, that blow which first of all seemed impossible to recover from, and now they were looking forward to the years ahead. And what had she and Johnny done during that same time? They were still in the holding-of-hands, kissing-under-the-porch stage! The slowness of it was perfectly ridiculous! She would have slept with him if he had asked her. Women are impatient by nature. When somebody offers us a new dress, we want to wear it right away! What on earth was Johnny doing? Why wasn't he in a greater hurry? He respected her. Undoubtedly he respected her, but a man can exaggerate his respect for a woman. In the end it becomes almost insulting. The months fly past. Her parents had mourned a son, while Johnny was still wonder-

ing what to do about his marriage! Their love story was almost an old story.

She turned savagely on her heels and hurried out of the room.

Marc said something as she passed, but she did not catch what it was. She did not very much care. Let them go on discussing Alf and Lily. In their eyes, Philippa's romance was merely a piece of buffoonery.

She knew not where to turn for sympathy. She was now jealous of Prudy because of her baby. Johnny, after his appearance at the schools, had disappeared, and though she longed for news of him, she did not dare call a second time on Mrs. Fairchild. Doris was the only person whose presence gave her real satisfaction.

Johnny's name never passed between them, but they used a language of their own which was made up of sighs and ejaculations. Mrs. Dale was doing considerably more about the house, but as her state of health seldom allowed her to finish the things she began, Philippa and Doris were obliged to tidy up after her. Doris found romance between the covers of a girls' magazine whose serial broke off every week at the most palpitating point. She would tell Philippa about the last chapter, and exclaim: "I do wish it was Friday to know what happens!" "My God! So do I!" Philippa would answer. This mixture of hope and boredom made her unreasonable. Her romance, like Doris's novelette, was too often held up. At night she could not sleep for thinking of the next instalment.

It was really a fine sight on Saturday morning to see all the waitresses coming out of the big gates of the Research Station in their long satin dresses, accompanied by the men,

who had clean shirts, and white carnations in their button-holes. The two porters had left the lodge to wink at the girls, and from time to time they glanced down the road for a sight of the bride, who was to come along in a hired car. The bride and bridegroom had taken the day off, and immediately after the ceremony they were to leave for Cardiff in the coach, returning on Sunday night. Because of the time of year, a week-end was all the honeymoon they could afford.

Alf had stayed as long as he dared at the bedside of his unfortunate mother, whose once pretty features were emaciated with pain. He was the eldest of six, and his brothers and sisters of school age did not hide their joy at the idea of a diversion from their usual Saturday mornings at home where their mother, especially since her illness had fully declared itself, cast a gloom over the crowded house. The lonely woman was certain she would not see her son again, and when he rose to go she pulled at his arm.

He said: "I'll look in after the wedding, Mum, and say good-bye before we go," but at the thought he would only come back to go off again, she redoubled her entreaties to stay a few minutes longer.

Lily lived four doors down the street. Her three elder sisters had gone off as usual to the canteen wearing the short dresses which, washed and ironed once a week, were 'good enough for work.' As soon as the breakfasts were over, they had changed into their satin dresses and made themselves look pretty for the wedding. The bridesmaids were to be in light blue and carry bouquets of snowdrops, which were already coming out in the woods and along the banks of the river.

Mrs. Dale, because of her desire to make the occasion as happy as possible, had decorated the church with flowers,

and by the time the bride, wearing her long veil, had arrived with her father, every seat was filled. Philippa sat in a choir stall under the memorial tablet to her brother. She knelt with her palms joined over a large Bible bound in leather handed down from the days of the Hallendyces, and with her delicate features and auburn hair she looked like some saintly vision from the past. Old Eadie was playing the organ with the enthusiasm of recaptured youth, for, like the rector and his wife, he was proud to see his beloved church come back in such a living manner into its own, and his fingers, knotted with rheumatism, were giving thanks to God in the way they knew best. Somebody had sounded, a moment earlier, a steam whistle at the Research Station, a strident, joyful cry. One sensed that for once, for the first time perhaps, the mediæval stones, the shades of squires and lords of the manor, had joined forces with the encroaching monster of to-morrow, the atom, which would end by blowing up the very memory of the old order of things.

The tattered flags of the past, of Waterloo and of other battles, caught in the draught of open doors, fluttered in the dark, mysterious roof, that canopy of wood and stone into which the music rolled and echoed. The sun penetrated the stained glass windows and placed kisses of gold on the arum lilies on the communion table. Seldom could there have been a more beautiful sight across the centuries of time, but when Philippa opened her eyes she saw things again as through a distorting glass. It was her wedding she was watching, and yet she was not the bride. The rotund little figure in white looked more like a ghost than a real woman. Across the aisle she could see Prudy, still pale from her accident, leaning on Bill's arm. Bill looked affectionate and proud. Prudy's baby was beginning to

show. Neither the ample dress nor the open coat could hide it.

She looked everywhere for Johnny.

In the choir stalls, along the pews, and amongst the shadows by the font, her eyes roamed feverishly, her soul thirsting for a sight of him.

The music was still playing, and Marc, in his surplice and magnificent red hood which made him look so dignified and resplendent, was standing in front of the altar, but Johnny had forgotten to attend the wedding which, in her folly, she believed was hers. What could this strange hallucination portend but that there would be no wedding for her, no church bells, no white dress, no good-looking father to bless her. And yet all these things were hers by right of possession. Marc was hers, hers! Marc, looking in the sunlight like a figure out of the Scriptures, was her own father, and when she was little she had sat on his knees. Somewhere on the roads, or in the fields, somewhere outside, was the man who loved her and who had asked her to be his wife. What was holding him back? What enemy had prevented him from coming? She looked at Prudy, and their eyes met. Prudy's look was full of sorrow and foreboding. What was she trying to say?

The young couple were kneeling at the altar rail and Marc was asking the girl if she would take the man to be her husband. Marc's voice was full, and musical and sympathetic. Surely there was a mistake! Why was his voice so kind in speaking to a stranger? The words became blurred. Her hands clenched the armorial binding of the Hallendyce Bible, and tears, hot tears, fell on the crimson and gold.

The bridegroom had slipped the ring on the bride's finger, the music peeled out louder and more triumphant

than ever, and the picturesque procession passed down the aisle, under the tattered flags, in front of her tear-filled eyes.

The doors were loudly thrown open, letting in shafts of sunlight and bouts of spring-scented air. The church emptied as if by magic. Voices could be heard laughing under the budding almond blossom.

The wind blew the doors back. Philippa, still kneeling in the choir stalls like a motionless angel, was alone in the silent church.

The dream was over.

Under the memorial to her dead brother she collapsed over the big Bible, her face buried in her hands, and her back heaving tumultuously as she sobbed out her heart.

XVII

ONE evening, after supper, the rector and his wife and daughter were in the study when the telephone rang in the hall. Philippa, who was standing by the bookcase, crossed the dining-room to answer it. The rector continued writing, but Mrs. Dale looked up from her knitting, expecting at any moment to be called to the receiver. Nobody ever telephoned now except about the parish. Mrs. Dale therefore listened for her daughter to say as usual: "It's for you, mother."

This summons did not come.

Philippa was apparently dealing with whatever crisis necessitated a call so late in the evening. Mrs. Dale could not hide a feeling of annoyance that her prerogatives were being taken away from her. Her knitting needles ceased to click. She even ordered Marc in an aggrieved whisper to stop making a noise with his papers. Obediently he remained motionless, with a heavy dictionary an inch above his manuscript, but though Philippa's voice was now more distinct, her part in the conversation did not help at all in discovering the identity of the caller. The short sentences she spoke merely signified an acceptance of whatever was being proposed.

As soon as the receiver had been replaced, Mrs. Dale called out imperiously:

"Who was it, my dear?"

"Nobody," came the staggering answer.

Philippa, instead of returning to the study, hurried up the stairs, presumably to her bedroom.

"What has come over the girl?" exclaimed Mrs. Dale, astounded by her daughter's behaviour. "Marc, we shall have to do something."

"She's of age," answered Marc, quite unmoved. "She has friends."

"Why do you say 'friends'?" asked Mrs. Dale sharply. "Surely the plural is unnecessary?"

As she spoke, steps could be heard again, this time descending the stairs. There was a swift vision of Philippa in a big coat, with a bright scarf over her head. The front door opened in a draught which sent sparks up the chimney. Then it closed with a bang, and all the house seemed silent.

"Marc!" cried Mrs. Dale. "Marc!"

Her voice had a touch of fear. She could hardly believe what had happened.

Outside, the rain was coming down in torrents, and the path between the rectory and the field was deep in mud.

Philippa ran to the main road, looking eagerly through the darkness towards the lodge of the Research Station, from which Johnny had told her he was speaking. But already he was beside her.

"Thanks for coming," he panted, as the water ran in cascades off his army coat. "I simply had to see you. It's dreadful to know that you're there, behind a lighted window, and that I don't dare knock on the door! Before your mother came down, we had the kitchen. Oh, that kitchen! How I loved it! But this evening, I had to think of something different. I nearly sent you a telegram!"

"No," she answered, "the telephone was better. It created just the right diversion for a dismal evening. Oh, Johnny, if only you knew how interminable my evenings have become!"

"Did they suspect anything?" he asked, putting his arm round her waist.

"Yes," she answered, defiantly, "I let them see, on purpose!"

She clung to him ravenously, feeling his hands, his arms, his hair.

"You'll get drenched," he said after a while, pressing her to him. I've nowhere to take you. Mum's got people for bridge. It wouldn't be possible."

"I'm all right," she said, truthfully.

"But the rain," he repeated. "Where can we go?"

He looked round helplessly.

She seemed suddenly aware that he was relying on her to find a solution. She thought a moment, and then whispered:

"The church! Why shouldn't we go there? It's always open for people like us who need shelter in the night."

"No," he objected, holding her back, "I don't think we ought to go into the church."

She looked at him, surprised.

"You're not afraid?" she asked.

"No, but I wouldn't feel at ease."

"Why not?" she queried. "We're not doing anything wrong. I'm not ashamed of loving you. I go into church for so many things."

He allowed himself to be led across the road and through the gate to the porch. She opened the door softly, and suddenly he saw how pretty it was, with the night light burning on the altar.

" Oh!" he exclaimed in admiration, " there's a candle!"

" Yes," she answered, " I light it myself every evening."

They shook the rain from their clothes and tiptoed across the stone floor as far as the font.

" Follow me," she whispered.

He was astonished at her lack of fear among these echoes and shadows at night, and asked:

" Where are you going?"

" To a platform in the triforium," she answered. " Nobody ever goes there. It's my special hiding place when I want to be alone. Look! Up these stone stairs. Keep holding my hand."

He followed her with a beating heart. He was as moved as if she were taking him thousands of miles away into a strange country. They emerged amongst the beams and delicate stonework, and when they looked over the side they could see, past gold and russet flags, the peaked choir stalls with their seats of dark, shining oak. The wind whistled above them, and the rain beat against the stained glass. From time to time something would strain or creak.

She looked into his eyes and asked:

" Where have you been all this time?"

" Driving like mad," he answered, " coming back at all hours of the night. The same as Bill."

" I know," she said, " but if you hadn't telephoned to-night, I'd have gone."

" Gone?" he repeated incredulously, " gone?"

She went on urgently:

" Daddy and mother will never agree to our marriage. You know that, don't you?"

" I . . . I didn't know," he answered slowly, surprised

by the forthrightness of her statement. "I mean, I hadn't looked at it in that way. You think I'm afraid to tell them? Is that it?"

"Perhaps."

"It isn't true. I swear it isn't true. I wanted to make good first. That's all."

"One can do without anything when one owns the most valuable thing in the world," she said ardently.

"What's that?" he asked, looking up into her eyes.

Her lips were quivering.

"What we feel for each other," she murmured.

"Yes," he answered, "I know. I'm ready now to tell them anything you like. I'm beginning to make good, Philippa. It was our love that showed me the way."

His voice dropped.

"When I drive through the night, I see you in front of me. We're rich, oh, not terribly rich, but it will do for a start. There's enough for us to get married just as soon as you like."

"Johnny!"

"Can you stick it out for another month?"

Her eyes flashed.

"I'll try, but Johnny, don't be too long! When Lily walked down the aisle the other day, I had a premonition that we would never be married. I saw myself in white kneeling in front of Daddy at the altar rail. The church was crowded, but we waited and waited, and you never turned up."

She was bending over the stonework, gazing fixedly at the spot where Lily had knelt a fortnight earlier.

"Come!" he said, "this place gives me the creeps."

"No," she answered, "I'm used to it."

"Perhaps," he said, "but it's all the people who have



come and gone. It makes me dizzy. Different costumes, different looks—a whole pageant of ghosts." He laughed nervously. "Do you suppose, for instance, a couple ever courted in this church before us?"

"Everything has happened here," she answered. "Women have had babies here, men have fought in the nave, the rector who was here before Daddy found a skeleton bricked up in the wall behind us, and in Napoleonic days, just when these flags were first going into battle, smugglers used this alcove to store rum."

"You like history, don't you?"

"I like to picture the various phases through which the church has passed. I can see the monks quite clearly, and the soldiers of the Pretender, and even the smugglers with their jerseys and woollen caps, bringing up the kegs of rum."

"I prefer to make history," he said.

"A man has a better chance of doing that than a girl," she answered. "You've already been out to the wonderful countries of the East."

"But from now on," he whispered, "we do everything together. Let's make a promise."

"I promise," she said.

Outside, it was raining as hard as ever, but even when they had crossed the road and were standing against the brick wall by the letter box, they could not decide to leave each other.

A car with its headlights full on, swept round the curve, and held them for a moment in a wide beam which reflected the rain and shining asphalt. Quick as it was, they had time to catch in each other's eyes, the depth of their love.

The car flashed past unconcernedly. Where was it going? To London? No longer was Philippa jealous of the people returning to the absorbing interests of city life.

Everything became silent once again except for the rain pouring down on the damp countryside. But they were warm and happy, their hearts perfectly content.

XVIII

PHILIPPA would often have breakfast early, and run to fetch Prudy at the caravan. They would then walk together past the manor house to the schools.

Johnny and Bill were working harder all the time. By Easter they hoped to be really important and it was more or less agreed that the wedding would take place towards the end of April. Philippa had not yet announced this fact to her parents. She felt quite confident that something would suddenly happen to ease the strained atmosphere at home.

What she needed most was somebody to talk to, and thus Prudy became more necessary to her every day.

Prudy's condition, Prudy's recent accident, Prudy's greater experience of life made her an ideal companion, but what really explained the extraordinary sympathy she felt for her was the difference in Prudy's upbringing. Prudy's humble origins had made of her an extraordinarily sensitive creature whose thoughts and reactions, often so different from those of her friend, filled a need in Philippa's mental outlook. Prudy had a lot of good sense which Philippa lacked. Philippa's sheltered, academic childhood contrasted violently with Prudy's struggles to educate herself whilst her parents quarrelled, or her mother gossiped with neighbouring charwomen over repeated cups of tea. Philippa had read somewhere that what had made George Sands' greatness was her parental mix-up of

low-class and aristocrat. Though Philippa had no pretensions to resemble the great French writer, she never tired of drawing on Prudy's reminiscences. Their characters were different but complementary.

These morning walks made Philippa feel happy for the rest of the day.

She was glad to guide Prudy's steps and to fuss over her, to clutch her by the arm, and to feel the warmth of her body. When the weather was fine, they were very gay.

This was a particularly lovely morning, one of those springlike days which bring out all the buds and make the birds sing so merrily that one hears them above all the other sounds of the busy world. They walked slowly for Prudy was feeling heavy, and a little scared lest she should fall.

As they reached the main road, they saw Bert, the milkman, his cap on the side of his head, his tray full of bottles balanced on a wheel of his pony cart, talking to a young man they had never seen before. Instinctively they drew themselves up. Prudy forgot her heavy feeling, and Philippa's eyes became brighter and more alert. Bert wished them good-morning, enquired after Prudy's health, and the stranger, finding himself drawn into this exchange of courtesies, lifted his hat and looked at the two girls with noticeable interest.

When they had turned the corner by the church, Philippa asked.

"Who can he be?"

"I don't know," answered Prudy, "but he's certainly good-looking!"

"He certainly is," Philippa admitted, "what do you suppose he is doing in this part of the world? We're quite

cut off from the rest of the village. It's not often we see a stranger."

"Unless he has something to do with the research station?" suggested Prudy.

"If he was an engineer or a scientist," answered Philippa, "he would not be talking to the milkman outside the gates. My guess is that he is here on holiday."

"At this time of year?" asked Prudy. "No, it's not that either. Perhaps he's some optimist from across the lake, looking for a house!"

Philippa laughed. She remembered Bert's story of how he never heard of the house that was to let next door to him.

This trivial incident had made them unusually happy, and they went on discussing the stranger until they reached the school door.

Sunshine filled the big room with its oak rafters where a month earlier Philippa had told the children about Absalom and the oak tree. Her heart beat pleasantly as she recalled the moment when Johnny had appeared at the door. She now looked with tenderness at the various subjects set out on the great blackboard.

The girls were filing in now, and she must leave.

"Good luck, Prudy," she whispered, "I'll call for you this afternoon."

They waved to each other, and Philippa walked quickly across the playground into the main road. As she passed her father's church, she saw the young man sauntering in the direction of the porch, pausing from time to time to examine the writing on a gravestone.

Doris was at the kitchen door, polishing the brass.

"Who do you think that young man in the churchyard

can be?" asked Philippa. "Prudy and I met him just now talking to the milkman. Would old Eadie have taken a lodger?"

Doris crossed the gravel path to look, and answered.

"Lord, no, miss! I know him. He's staying at The Bull."

"You know him?" queried Philippa, surprised.

Doris glanced round to make sure the rector was not about, and answered.

"He's just like the young man in the story I was telling you about. It was yesterday tea-time he came into the shop."

She spoke in a pleasant sing-song voice which accentuated instead of dropping the 'h's.' Her eyes sparkled, and she looked like some sprite come down from the Welsh hills.

"Tell me, Doris!" urged Philippa, intrigued by the maid's enthusiasm.

"He bought four ounces of bull's eyes," she confided. "I was on my own. Auntie had gone round to the greengrocer. I tried to read his name on the cover of the ration book, but he was that sly I never had a chance. He held it open with his thumb, and I could feel his eyes going through me."

She paused dramatically.

"You remember that piece in the story where the young man . . . ?"

Philippa laughed.

"Of course, Doris. He leaned over the counter and kissed the pretty heroine behind the right ear! Now we have to wait till Friday for the next instalment."

Doris looked suspiciously at the rector's daughter.

"The young man in the shop did not quite do that,

miss, but he told me he was staying at The Bull."

Doris, to hide her confusion, put her energy into polishing the door bell, and continued.

"He doesn't look like if he was married."

"What makes you say that?" asked Philippa.

"It must be lovely to walk up the aisle in white!" she sighed, "I suppose you'll be the next, miss?"

Surprised by the suddenness of the question, Philippa blushed, and asked nervously.

"Has mother gone to the village, Doris?"

"Yes, miss, there's digestive biscuits at Black's. She asked me to let her know."

"You were right," answered Philippa. "I'll go and peel the potatoes."

At four o'clock, as she had promised, she went over to the schools where, to her surprise, she discovered Bill waiting for Prudy.

"There's a thoughtful husband!" she exclaimed, laughing, "I had better not butt in!"

"Don't be silly," answered Bill, "we'll all go down the road together."

Prudy arrived surrounded by her young pupils, and when she saw Bill she blushed with pleasure.

He smiled protectively, and said.

"I thought I'd have a walk in the sun."

"What have you done with Johnny?" asked Philippa, as they turned into the road, "I haven't seen him for nearly a week."

"You'll see him to-morrow," Bill answered. "And don't worry. Everything's fine. We'll have a fleet of trucks soon, and then perhaps we'll form a company."

"A company!" gasped Prudy.

"A company!" echoed Philippa.

They smiled as if to say.

"Well, what do you know about that? Aren't we lucky?"

Their affection for each other was increased by the fact that their menfolk were partners. A company? In a way, it would be theirs. The wind was cold. They laughed as they wheeled past the manor house, and began to hum:

It's the songs you sing, and the smile you wear
That makes the sun shine everywhere.

When they reached the rectory, Bill said.

"So long, Miss Dale. I'll tell Johnny we met."

Prudy, clinging close to Bill, felt her happiness going to her head as if she had sipped an unaccustomed cocktail. She wanted to talk to give expression to her joy.

"Thanks for coming," she murmured, "it's like old times."

"When I was courting," added Bill. "You remember?"

"Oh, Bill, how could I not remember?"

Both thought back to the evenings in another spring when Bill had brought butter to the cottage for Prudy's mother. Then there was the episode of the larder and the mice! They smiled. Presently Bill said.

"I'm sorry the old lady isn't here to see us. I always liked her. She was a good sort."

"She would have been excited about the baby, wouldn't she, Bill?"

He nodded approvingly, and added.

"I'm looking for a cottage, somewhere nicer to live.

You can't have the baby here."

"I might manage," she countered heroically.

"Whatever next?" he said, "I wouldn't let you!"

"But cottages, Bill, don't exist any more?"

He drew himself up and corrected with a touch of pride.

"It depends. They do for those who can pay."

"Oh, Bill!"

"Something really comfortable," he went on with a wave of his arm, "bow windows and some nice flowers in front."

"And a bedroom with a cot in the corner," she went on.

"And a radiogram, and a television set!"

She laughed.

"Dreams, Bill!"

"No!" he answered forcefully, "not dreams at all. You'll see. We're making money. I'll give it you all for Easter like a box of chocolates tied up with pink ribbon!"

They were crossing the field, and he held her tightly to prevent her from tripping. From time to time he stopped to kiss her on the forehead. She thought it was the most beautiful day in her life.

As they put the key into the door of the caravan, Diana, hearing Bill, barked with joy.

"Good girl! Good girl!" he exclaimed, as the terrier leapt forward to greet him.

Everything in the caravan came to life now that Bill was in it.

The alarm clock ticked more happily. The sun streamed through the curtained windows.

He took off his collar and tie and hung them up on a peg, and the collar hung there in a curve still full of the warmth of his neck.

Then he took off his shoes and placed them under the divan.

"It's good to be at home!" he exclaimed, stretching his limbs. "Diana! Good girl! Lie down!"

"Bacon and eggs, Bill?"

She went to the larder. He watched her with an air of satisfaction. Then, making himself comfortable against the cushions, he took a cigarette from his case.

"Don't do that, Bill. Wait till we've eaten," she pleaded.

"Of course!" he said, putting the cigarette back into the case, "I keep on forgetting. Oh!" he added, looking round, "new curtains!"

"I found them in that box mother left us," she said. "You wouldn't find stuff like that now for a pound a yard. And then there would be the coupons!"

She broke the eggs in the frying pan.

"What's new?" asked Bill happily.

"Philippa came to fetch me after breakfast," she answered. "Oh, and I must tell you! We met the milkman talking to a stranger, quite a good-looking young man! He raised his hat to us. It was rather thrilling."

She could have babbled on for ever, just for the fun of it, and she wondered vaguely if she could make him jealous.

"I think he must have been asking his way about," she continued, "but what do you suppose could have brought him here? I'm sure we intrigued him. If you ask my opinion he asked Bert all about us. He looked frightfully interested."

She unlatched the window to throw the egg shells into the bin, and exclaimed.

"Talk of the devil! Oh, Bill! There he is! On the road, looking over the hedge."

Bill jumped up and knelt on the divan in his socks, peering out over her shoulder.

"The man with the raincoat over his arm?"

"Yes, what do you think of him?" asked Prudy.

Bill pulled her back.

"Don't show yourself so much," he ordered.

"Why?" she exclaimed. "Perhaps he wants to draw our caravan!"

"I don't care what he wants," said Bill, "leave him alone."

Prudy turned round anxiously. She failed to understand why Bill was taking her joke so badly. Annoyed, she shook her shoulders, and hurried back to the gas ring where the eggs were sizzling in the pan.

"Lay the table, Bill, there's a dear!"

He tied a dishcloth round his waist, and she heard the clatter of the knives and forks, but she sensed there was something wrong.

"Why can't I hold my tongue?" she said to herself.

After a moment's silence, Bill asked aggressively.

"What was he trying to find out from Bert?"

"We didn't stop," answered Prudy, "Bert asked me how I was, and I said: 'Much better, thanks,' and that's all that happened."

"Except that he took off his hat to you?"

"If he was brought up that way? What else could he do?"

"All right. I'm not jealous!"

Prudy made the tea, and served the bacon and eggs.

"Give me a kiss, Bill!" she begged, trying to bring back a smile to his face.

He kissed her absent-mindedly on the top of the head.

"Hadn't Miss Dale ever seen him before?"

"No," she answered, "that's the point."

She was trying to puzzle out what he was thinking, and asked.

"You don't suppose he could be in love with her? Without her knowing, I mean?"

"It's not that," he said.

He swallowed a few gulps of boiling tea, and getting up suddenly, put on his collar and tie.

"Bill! Bill! What are you doing? Where are you going?"

He straightened his appearance in the broken mirror, and put on his shoes.

She looked on anxiously.

"Bill! Your supper?"

"I'm not hungry any more," he answered.

"Is it something I've said?"

"Look, Prudy, don't keep buzzing round me. You get on my nerves."

He took down his overcoat and hat, and added.

"Don't worry. I'll be back in an hour."

Then he set off across the field.

Seeing him go like that, Prudy's laughter had died on her lips, she was afraid.

She watched him making for the road, his hands thrust into his pockets, and his back resolute. She tried to call him back, but no sound came from her throat.

Soon he was out of sight.

Then her hands sought her flanks, and she made that movement which a woman, expecting a child, sometimes makes when she is alone, that attempt to feel the fruit

within her. She would have liked to hold her baby in her arms.

Everything had suddenly turned dark and sad.

The manly odour of Bill's clothes, the sound of his voice, had scarcely filled the caravan but he was gone, and she was alone once again, as she was so often, too often lately, her mind filled with a yearning for his presence.

XIX

BILL, having reached the main road, crossed the bridge, and turned up the lane which led to the Ganner farm.

There was a donkey in an orchard with her little one whose legs were hardly strong enough to support the body. The almond blossom was already out and spring scented the air. But Bill frowned. These things which an hour ago had increased his light-heartedness, now gave him no pleasure because he was anxious, and his anxiety had the effect of turning spring into a harbinger not of success but of failure.

He kept on thinking: "It could have been like this, if . . ."

This was just the sort of weather in which he had liked to picture the cottage with the bow window and the flowers in front.

The idea that something might happen to prevent the cottage from materialising, gnawed at his stomach and made him irritable like a man who is kept waiting for his dinner. Debonair and thorough, he was not brave in uncertainty. When everything was going well, nothing could stop him. He would go unflinchingly. But as soon as he felt that something unpleasant was hiding round the corner, he would have no more peace till he had forced it to come out into the open.

The stranger worried him.

Bill had spent so much of his time during the last few years waiting in cafés and milk bars, or simply at the wheel of his car outside hotels or shops or in parking places, that there were types he had learnt to recognise by some detail of their dress or by a look in their eyes. Once, at midnight, when he had been half asleep in his car in Berkeley Square (his customer was having supper at the Berkeley), two men entered the car next to his and drove off. He looked at them with that detached air of a man who is not quite certain whether what he sees is real or the continuation of a dream, but his mind registered quite clearly the conviction that the two men had no right to be there. An hour later (you will recall that Bill's customers never went to bed early), the police came to ask him for a description of the thieves.

This experience confirmed Bill's opinion that he had a gift for guessing what people were. As soon as Prudy pointed out the stranger, he had wanted to answer: "He's a plain-clothes man!" but he had checked himself. There was no point in telling Prudy what he thought. She would have wondered what it mattered. And in a way it didn't matter. But all the same, he was worried.

He pushed open the steel gate into old Ganner's yard.

The farmer had a big, comfortable, old-fashioned house with a stone kitchen which was always well scrubbed. Shining brass pans (no longer used) hung on either side of the chimney. At right angles to the house were the hayricks and a barn (with a black roof), and in the yard there were pigs and geese and chickens. Ganner, who was cleaning the sparking plug of a two-stroke motor, held out an oily hand.

Bill, as he had told Johnny, first got to know the farmer when he was working at the canteen. The research station

was in receipt of adequate rations from the Ministry of Food, but the higher people, many of whom lived in, were glad to vary their menus with the fat ducks and tender chickens, not to mention the pork, smoked hams, new-laid eggs and fresh butter which the neighbouring farmers could take in unobserved.

Bill was admirably acquainted with this clandestine commerce which took place not only at the research station but in many other factories and Government offices which had sprung up in this beautiful part of the country during the war. Often he had been sent by the catering manager (whose wife found him so much to her taste) to talk business with Ganner, and indeed he might have brought this up at the time of his unjust dismissal; but was not vindictive.

Ganner had learnt to trust him. This was the important part. The trucking business would have proved less profitable if Ganner had not sent the young partners here and there on errands which were excellently paid.

Bill, seeing there was nobody about but the farmer, and not being a man to lose time, said.

"There's a 'tec' pacing up and down the road."

"I know!" answered Ganner.

For a moment Bill was not sure which of two conflicting emotions sent the blood to his forehead—the discovery that his powers of perception were, as he had always suspected, little short of miraculous, or the fear which this discovery immediately engendered. He tried to look unconcerned as he asked huskily.

"What's he doing?"

"It's about a pig," answered the farmer, rubbing a petrol rag across the points of his sparking plug, "but there's no proof."

"It's a nuisance," said Bill, so mightily relieved that it was not what he had feared that his face took on a broad smile. He felt like a man whose doctor might have said to him: "No, no, my good fellow, there's nothing wrong with you."

"A cigarette?" he asked out of sheer gratitude, holding out his case.

"Thanks."

"All the same, it's a nuisance," repeated Bill meditatively, because of the . . ."

What Bill really wanted say was: "Because of the grain you've poured into your empty barrels," but he had learnt not to mention things by their real names, even when there was nobody about. So with a wink to denote the corn and a wave of the hand in the direction of the black-roofed barn, he repeated:

"Because of the . . . in your . . ."

Ganner drew himself up and said quietly.

"Nobody will go there."

"No, I don't suppose they will," answered Bill, "but Johnny is driving back from Liverpool during the night. He was to deliver your stuff at about five a.m."

Ganner scratched his head.

"Sweet corn, wasn't it?"

"Four sacks of American sweet corn," answered Bill.

"Not much, but enough, if you catch my meaning."

"It wouldn't do for the truck to come in at that hour," said Ganner. "Somebody might see it. Somebody might look for something and find worse. I'll tell you what. Keep the grain a few days, till Sunday eh?"

"But where?" asked Bill.

Ganner tapped him on the shoulder.

"A smart fellow like you?"

The compliment brought a smile to Bill's handsome face.

"O.K.," he answered, "we'll manage."

XX

THERE was no question about it: every time Johnny went on a trip, full of expectation for the unknown, for the romantic, his mind, after only a few hours, refused to be satisfied with what six months ago would have filled him with enchantment.

His next trip to Liverpool was a case in point.

On his way through the docks he had seen a magnificent vessel, white from bows to stern, like some bird out of a story of Hans Andersen, graceful but strong, evocative of snow and fiords and clear green water, sufficiently distinguished in design to arrest attention and call forth a cry of admiration from anybody who, like Johnny, came upon it unexpectedly from a maze of sheds and cranes. A wisp of white smoke was rising from the funnel. Men, calling to one another in a strange tongue, were working unhurriedly on the decks. The vessel was flying the Blue Peter. She was here, but she would be gone to-morrow. Her heart was beating and she was ready to glide silently across the water into the horizon when a new morning broke.

Johnny's eyes glistened and rather nervously (he was always nervous in moments of emotion), he asked a dockerman.

"Where does she come from?"

They were standing by the stern. The man craned his neck, and read.

" Ingrid—Oslo."

" Where is she going?"

" Santiago, Chile."

" Think of that!" exclaimed Johnny, for his own benefit. " Half across the world!"

The docker moved away and Johnny was left alone. His imagination pictured a fantastic Santiago with narrow streets, shining white houses, cactus trees and men and women like the ones portrayed on the covers of cigar boxes. In the background there were the snow-capped ranges of the Andes. He smiled. It would be so easy to leave his lorry and walk up the gangway and hide himself till the ship was safely out to sea.

Then, inexplicably, the dream broke, shattering itself on the hard quay. The fun which had mounted to his lips, flew away. His arms fell limply. He was bored.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled violently, but the tobacco had lost its usual fragrance. He threw the cigarette into the oily water and watched a seagull dive towards it. That bored him too. He wished himself back at home.

No, that is not what he wished.

What he wished was to have Philippa standing beside him so that he could say to her: " Isn't she lovely? She's called the Ingrid and she's going to Santiago, Chile. Wouldn't it be fun to go on board? We would have the cabin with the light blue curtains tied back with silver rings. We'd . . ."

He knew that he had lost the gift of enjoying things by himself. This ship no longer had any magic because she was not there to answer: " Yes, Johnny, you're right. It's wonderful. Let's go to the end of the world."

He felt annoyed with himself.

This inability to think alone, to look at a ship, to

admire a sunset, was almost as bad as being deficient in something. But that is what it had come to. His evening had become a bore because she was not there. His thoughts needed an echo, his eyes a reflection. Santiago, for instance. She would certainly have read something about Santiago. Once, he had called her *The Dictionary*. She knew a thousand curious things, and her prodigious memory allowed her to bring her knowledge out all hot at a moment's notice. Somebody had written a play about Santiago as it was in the old times. He remembered her telling him. A play with profound reflections on the present. But who had written the play? And what were the reflections? Why was she not there to put substance into his imagination? How lonely he felt walking up and down this silly quay, indistinguishable from a dock, from any of the colourless human ants parading in front of the departing ship.

The departing ship.

When would he and she go off together on a ship across the oceans for their honeymoon? He was suddenly anxious to hurry the wedding. He had a plan. He would sell out to Bill and take her away to some distant part of the world where he would start all over again. He walked furiously in circles as if this feverish energy could hasten anything. He remembered that he had promised to speak to the rector and that this was imperative if the wedding was to take place in Philippa's church. He thought about this question for what seemed like a couple of minutes. He repeated an infinite number of times: "The rector! How can I see the rector? What am I to say to him?" Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Dad must talk to him. To-morrow I'll send Dad along. Mum and I will put our heads together. That's

the way. I ought to have thought of it earlier."

The great thing was to return home as fast as possible. He looked at his watch. Ganner's grain merchant would be waiting for him. What was the order? Four sacks of American sweet corn which Bill said must be delivered at exactly five a.m. at the farm. Ganner did not like people prying into his business. How right he was!

"But all the same," thought Johnny, returning to his own affairs, "what is the matter with me? An hour ago, I was still for not hurrying this marriage, and now I can't wait for it to happen!"

He tried to explain this apparent contradiction. It was, of course, only apparent. His love had never varied. Probably his bachelor life had made strenuous though quite absurd efforts to keep holding on to his coat tails. But that was over now. The experience of the ship was conclusive. He was miserable. He could think of a dozen exciting things to do if she were here. Alone, he might as well throw himself into the Mersey. But if she were here! They would look for a cosy restaurant. They would have a lovely dinner. They would hold hands and talk. They would have coffee and something to finish off the meal. And then what fun it would be to drive back with her sitting next to him!

He wondered if he dared telephone.

He longed for her presence. It became almost a physical pain.

Towards eight p.m. Bill returned to the caravan.

He was rather ashamed of having left Prudy so abruptly, but what some people might have called a moment of panic was really the action of a wise man who leaves nothing to chance. Attention to detail was a precaution he

had taught himself painfully from the time he was obliged to leave the chemist with whom he was apprenticed, and take up jobs, all sorts of different jobs, whose skill consisted mostly in keeping his wits about him. Now that he was reassured about the stranger whose appearance had made so many feminine hearts flutter, he felt magnanimously disposed towards Prudy. He had filled his lungs with spring air and new hope. This evening he would take her to the pictures.

Prudy received this news with resignation.

Since her husband's strange departure, she had remained for over three hours turning over dark thoughts in the caravan. She had not even had the courage to wash up the tea things with the result that during all that time she had been confronted with such depressing evidence of his departure as half an egg, several greasy rashers of bacon and some strong tea in which the milk, as the liquid cooled, formed unappetising streaks on the surface.

She had gone over every phase of their conversation minutely and each time, when she arrived at the moment beginning: "Talk of the devil! There he is!" she hid her face in her hands and sobbed. It had been after these words that his look changed.

She thought: "If only I hadn't told him!", but how could she have known in advance that her words would have such a catastrophic result? The more she turned the problem over in her mind, the more she was convinced that Bill was hiding something important. She admired him for putting his back into a job and for working all hours, but she was suspicious, almost contemptuous, of that streak of vanity which made him so boastful with women. She had not been able to discover exactly what had happened with the caterer's wife at the research

station. Probably Bill was not so innocent as he had made out.

But perhaps it was not that at all?

There had been the sudden offer to buy her a cottage with a bow window and flowers in front. He had been coming home lately with great wads of notes in his pockets. But then all sorts of people carried large sums about with them these days. Nobody trusted the banks any longer. Bill said that snoopers looked into the private accounts.

In a short time now she would have to give up teaching at the schools. She would no longer be independent. Every time she needed something she would have to ask Bill. And if Bill did anything silly (she never quite trusted him), there would not be her salary to fall back on as there had been last time when he had lost his job at the research station.

She thought that perhaps the hardest thing about being a woman was the trial of not quite knowing what the man was up to.

"Well, what's the matter? You don't look pleased?" asked Bill.

"It's not that, Bill. I feel a wreck, and I haven't even done the washing up."

"I'll help you. We'll do it in no time."

She looked at him gratefully.

"Thanks, Bill. Wait till I fill the kettle."

As she turned the tap he came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Love me?" he asked.

"Of course," she murmured.

He was all smiles again and obviously expecting her to reflect his mood. She smiled back though a trifle wistfully.

She felt too exhausted to go on searching for explanations, and anyway, the cloud had lifted, at least for the moment.

They went to the cinema and, on their return, had something to eat. This time nothing happened to alter Bill's good temper. Before going to bed, he declared.

"I've set the alarm for four-thirty. There's an early job but I'll be back for breakfast."

"Very well," she answered dutifully, "I'll have it waiting for you."

Bill leant up against a tree (so that his silhouette should be confused with the trunk) about ten yards on the town side of the bridge, and turned up his overcoat collar. The night was dark and cold, and a mist hung close to the ground.

The time was exactly five.

For a moment, he had been afraid that Johnny might have come early and already turned into the lane, but the six heavy wheels would have bitten into the softer earth. The great thing was to do this job quickly in case anybody might be watching Ganner's farm.

Bill would not have long to wait. Johnny had that military precision which made him so reliable on occasions like this. Bill was learning to appreciate the young man who had done so well out East. When Johnny said: "I'll be there at five" he was there almost on the stroke. That went for everything else. And Johnny had something which Bill knew very well was missing in his own character—an assurance, an ease, a gift for never being ruffled in an emergency. But then Johnny had always had a comfortable home, and parents with just enough money not to have to worry about the next meal. That gave a man assurance. Money! What an immense rôle money

played in making a man a man. Johnny would certainly not stay long in the haulage business. He would want something smarter, if only because of Miss Dale. Already he had more or less promised to sell out to Bill after the marriage. And when Bill owned the business he would take no more risks. By then he would have become a person of consequence.

Two amber eyes blinked through the fog and the ground shook with the heavy roll of the approaching truck.

Bill sprang out from his hiding place, and running into the centre of the road, waved his torch until the wheels came to a standstill.

"Johnny!"

The cabin door opened, and Bill with an agility remarkable for a man who was not physically strong, clambered up.

"Drive straight on," he said, "I'll explain later."

Johnny let the clutch in, and the truck went on.

"We're not taking the grain to Ganner after all," said Bill. "He's in a spot of trouble about something else. It's better not to take the risk. Draw up by the church. We'll talk."

Johnny pulled in by the signpost which pointed to the village under the lake, and as they smoked, Bill told his partner about the stranger and how he had lost no time in going round to the farm.

"But what shall we do with the corn?" asked Johnny when he had listened to the story.

"That's just what I've been trying to figure out," answered Bill. "We mustn't take it back to the garage. That's sure."

"The caravan is no place to hide it, either," said Johnny. "That leaves my people's place."

"The building yard?" put in Bill. "No! That's too obvious. Think of somewhere else. Just for two or three days. Perhaps not even as long as that."

They sat leaning forward, smoking, and looking fixedly at the mist through the windscreen.

"Think hard," said Bill. "It's important. I took Prudy to the pictures last night and thought from the beginning to the end. But it was no good. I couldn't find anything."

"I'm thinking," answered Johnny.

He was thinking of the grain, but he was also thinking how he had stood with Philippa by the rectory wall under the drenching rain. He looked at the faint outline of the church, and remembered how they had sat close to one another high above the choir stalls. He recalled the touch of her hand, and the heat of her body. He remembered her voice and the words came back into his ears: "Everything has happened here. Women have had babies, men have fought in the nave, the rector who was here before Daddy found a skeleton bricked up in the wall behind us, and in Napoleonic days, just when those flags were first going into battle, smugglers used this alcove to store rum."

The words echoed back through the cab of the truck: "Smugglers used this alcove to store rum."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Johnny, gripping his partner's arm, "I've got it!"

Bill looked up enquiringly.

"Let's get down," Johnny continued quietly. "I'll show you."

XXI

THEY drove the truck into the garage, and parted at the end of the town where the mist of the finishing night struck the surface of the empty streets which were covered with damp. It was still dark. The lamp-posts threw a blue light on this uninspiring fringe of a sleeping town. Johnny watched his friend disappear in the direction of the bridge. The footsteps gradually became muffled and the hurrying figure merged into the fog.

Johnny, with infinite precautions, pushed open the door of the building yard. He knew at exactly which positions it creaked for he was in the habit of coming home at all hours of the night and he disliked waking up his parents, not so much from filial regard or out of respect for their sleep, but because he had a horror of fuss, and the one thing in the world that put him in a rage was to find his father in his nightshirt at the top of the stairs. "Is that you, Johnny? I thought it was a burglar. What late hours you do keep!"

The door of the yard responded amicably to his pushes. "Quietly! Quietly!" muttered Johnny, speaking to the hinges as if they were capable of understanding him. "Don't creak till the dogs recognise my voice!" For there were dogs in the yard and they would bark unless they first recognised Johnny's voice or the tread of his step.

When he had closed the door and spoken in whispers to the dogs who had come out of their kennels dragging their steel chains and wagging their tails in recognition of the master's son, Johnny tiptoed to the front door where he let himself in with a latchkey. Five minutes later he had pulled off his clothes, washed himself in cold water and thrown himself happily between the sheets. Almost immediately he fell asleep.

The last-minute change of plan in the delivery of Ganner's corn had neither surprised him nor made the slightest difference to the feverish plans he had started on the quay in Liverpool for the hastening of his wedding. The two climbs which he and Bill had been obliged to make up the narrow stairs of the church to the triforium, bent forward, gripping the sacks by the ears, like coal heavers delivering coke, holding their breaths from time to time because of the eeriness of their surroundings, scared by the slightest sounds of the night, the creaking of a board or the hooting of an owl, merely confirmed Johnny's desire to end his nomad bachelor life.

This impression of being a nomad was something else which had just sprouted in his mind. He had no home of his own, only a room, a lodging, in his parents' house to which he was obliged to return stealthily each night. He ought really to buy a tent and take it with him on his next assignation with Philippa. They would put it up at the side of the road, and at eleven p.m. when she had to go back to the rectory, he would unfold the tent and take it back to the parental home. He had laughed about this as he drove back in the lorry. But in truth, he thought, pursuing the theme, this business of not knowing where to meet was monstrous.

The immorality of hiding four sacks of grain in a church

had never seriously entered his mind, for if the triforium was a place in which to exchange lovers' solemn promises, it could also be called upon to help Johnny and his best friend when, through no fault of theirs (they could not be held responsible for Ganner's pig!), they had fallen into a spot of bother. True enough, in the course of this nocturnal adventure, his conscience had on several occasions made itself felt partly because he was moderately religious, and partly because he was not quite sure how Philippa would take it. This last consideration was not vital. He was sure of himself, sure of her love. He could talk her round to anything. A man always wins in the end. But if Bill was right and the sacks need only stay there for a day or two, he would say nothing to Philippa about them. There was no point in inviting a quarrel! He would tell her after the wedding when they were steaming across the Atlantic, down under the Cape or up the Pacific, on the way to Santiago, Chile.

The March sun came in through the window.

As soon as he put his head on the pillow, the next morning was there waiting for him. He always slept like that. His nights were like journeys through space, journeys which took no time at all. They were faster than the fastest jet planes, as silent as the rocket which makes a noise only when it hits the ground.

There was another thing about him. He invariably woke up in the best possible temper. His awakenings were delicious. On this particular morning the sun warmed his eyelids which opened lazily, glad to let in the light and air. His eyes renewed their acquaintance with the neat but Spartanlike room with its square window overlooking the small garden which, as long as Johnny could remember, had been his father's delight on summer evenings.

Though he was awake, quite awake, he took care not to move. He liked particularly these two or three moments so propitious for idle thought. Gradually he became aware that somebody was moving softly between the bed and the chest of drawers. A cup and saucer had been deposited almost without noise (his ears quickly, however, recognised the particular jangle) on the table, and now hands, very sure of themselves, were arranging and disarranging his socks in the top drawer of the chest.

He said nothing at first, pretending still to be asleep whilst his nostrils sensuously inhaled the warm sugary waves emanating from the morning cup of tea. He knew that Mrs. Fairchild who knitted all his socks was now putting them in rows like little soldiers at one end of the drawer, and that perhaps she had just added a new pair knitted in his absence in some particularly lurid colour which he would probably be ashamed to wear. She loved to rummage amongst his things and bring out with exclamations of anger, which anybody could see was not real anger, some piece of apparel ruined by a burn from a cigarette or by an oily mark and then replaced amongst the clean linen though obviously it should have found its own way to the wash! "Oh, Johnny, how could you!"

Her presence on these occasions was agreeable but what he resented was the way she still treated him as if he were a little boy. She would come in at all times scarcely troubling to knock. She had not yet realised that her possessiveness was embarrassing to a man who had thoughts of his own, thoughts which he was not bound (indeed which he could *not*) share with her. But this morning, he would take her into his confidence.

He made a long, lazy grunt to show that he was waking

up, and she came towards him with a pair of socks in each hand, and said.

"I brought you a cup of tea, Johnny. I made it myself."

He stretched himself and answered more affectionately than usual.

"Thanks, mum, that's just what I wanted."

She beamed.

"Sit up in bed. There! There! I'll bring it to you."

(She deposited the socks on the eiderdown.) "My! You must have come in terribly late last night. Your dad said he thought he heard the dogs move at about six. He looked at his watch, but I said I was sure you were back just after midnight."

"Dad was right, mum, I was pretty late."

"Well, if it's business!"

She was always ready to make excuses.

Johnny sat up, punched the pillow to make a cushion for his back, and ran his fingers through his hair. Mrs. Fairchild had not expected to find her son so affectionate. He had been slipping away from her lately or, to be more exact, she had never rediscovered him since he had been torn away from her at the beginning of the war. Being sent out East had done it. She had not had the chance of seeing him change a little more every year. Now he was full of reticences. That was the price one paid for having a boy. When they are very young they are more precious to a mother than girls. Whatever people say, the difference in sex has something to do with it. A mother likes to fondle, and sometimes to scold, the man of to-morrow. But when they grow up one can no longer talk to them about the things that matter. Their problems are too different. One almost wishes that the boy were a girl.

Oh, no, that is not true. One never wishes that. If Mrs. Fairchild had dared, she would have sat on the edge of the bed and taken Johnny in her arms. But if she annoyed him, the rather indefinable charm of this sunny morning would disappear and she would feel angry with herself for the rest of the day. She must be reserved. That was the secret with grown-up sons. That is why she had said: "Well, if it's business!"

"I hope the tea isn't cold?" she went on.

"No, mum, it's perfect."

"I know that however late you come back, you get up early. It's nice then to have a cup of tea."

"Yes, mum, it's nice."

Johnny lifted his cup and thought: "If she didn't talk so much about silly things. So many words about a cup of tea!" But he needed her help and said coaxingly.

"Sit on the edge of the bed, mum."

She sat down suspiciously. He was probably going to ask her for money, but at the price of good hug it was almost worth it. She sat down and the spring mattress creaked.

"The mattress wants oiling," she said.

She was determined not to be sentimental.

The reference to the mattress made him frown. The problem in his head was so much more vital than a mattress. His mother had no sense of values.

"Mum," he said, taking her hand partly to give himself courage and partly to flatter her, "you know what we were talking about the other day, about me marrying Philippa Dale, you know we're engaged..."

"I know," she answered, "your dad and me were talking about it last night."

"You were?" he asked hopefully. "What, for instance?"

"We were remarking you hadn't said much about it lately."

She watched her son closely. Her heart was beating, and though she would not have admitted it, she would have liked him to answer: "Mum, I don't love her any more." Not that she had anything against Philippa. Quite the contrary. If her son was anxious to get married she could think of nobody more suitable. In fact socially it was a rung up the ladder, except about the money. The Dales had no money. But it was a wrench to abandon her son to any woman. She had not finished with him yet. It was only yesterday he was tiny. She loved him so much. Her eyes wandered from him to the socks she had placed on the eiderdown. Nobody would ever be able to knit for him like she did.

"Mum," said Johnny, "I want you to do me a favour."

She smiled as if to say: "What's that between you and me?"

"Mum, I haven't had the guts to go and see the rector. Tell dad to do it, mum. To-day. To-morrow. As soon as he can. Mum, I love her so much."

Mrs. Fairchild bit her lips. The words 'I love her so much' had burnt into her heart. Her son was coaxing her this morning, not out of affection for her, but because he wanted to use her as an instrument.

But because she was brave she smiled and said.

"What do you want your dad to ask?"

"For the rector to marry us in his church, mum. Philippa says she wouldn't feel properly married otherwise."

" I should think not, indeed. And when are you getting married?"

" At Easter, mum."

" It's nice getting married at Easter," said Mrs. Fairchild sentimentally. " Your dad and me . . ."

He had never cared when his parents were married.

" Your dad is busy to-day," said Mrs. Fairchild, " but to-morrow he's going to the churchyard about the buttress. Perhaps I could persuade him to see the rector."

" Oh, mum, thanks!"

She kissed him, and prolonged the pleasure as long as she dared.

" That's nothing," she said wistfully. Then drawing herself up:

" Oh, look, Johnny! You haven't even drunk your tea!"



XXII

THE day began with the mechanical sameness which was one of the chief characteristics of life at the rectory. The birds sang in the garden, Philippa got out of bed with a yawn, looked out of the open window at the brick wall, the highway and the Saxon church as she did every day of her year, put on her dressing gown and slippers, and hurried along the uneven oak corridor to the bathroom. Doris let herself in at the back door with the key which hung on a rusty nail amongst the ivy, filled the kettle and made the toast for the family breakfast. Marc shaved himself in his dressing-room with an old-fashioned razor, exchanging a few early-morning reflections through the open door with Mrs. Dale who was brushing her still lovely hair in the bedroom.

Soon the house throbbed gently like a reliable cargo ship plodding along the high seas without excitement or hurry. One heard the sounds of moving furniture. The smell of toast rose appetisingly from the kitchen and made each of the three members of the family look forward with quiet anticipation to the sounding of the gong.

At moments like these one became aware of the traditional greatness of this low, rambling house. One felt sure that things had gone on like this since the days of Queen Anne. There had always been a rector and a rector's family, as well as tea and toast and marmalade! The happenings of the outer world beat upon it without severely

altering the mechanism. Napoleon and Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler had cut up the frontiers of Europe but nobody had yet lopped off an inch of the rectory garden. It was at once smaller and more stable than all the rest of the world. Amongst the least important of all the rectories in England and Wales (nobody had so much as heard of it five miles away), it remained not only standing but fulfilling the same humble function, even after its parish had been sent to the bottom of an artificial lake.

The primroses and daffodils came up in the rectory garden and in the pretty little churchyard of the Saxon church in spite of the headlines in *The Times*, just as the roses were kissed by the sun in Belgium and France in spite of the German tanks which roared across these two unhappy countries during the invasion of 1940.

This particular day, therefore, began as every other day.

Philippa, confident in her future, had become affectionate and docile in the house. Her brusqueness had been due to Johnny's inaction, but now that they were going to get married at Easter, whatever happened, she could afford to be even nicer than was necessary to her parents whose hands she was about to force.

Johnny had told her about his talk with Mrs. Fairchild. It was he who had fixed Easter as the very longest he could wait. She had turned up the calendar and counted exactly how many days that meant. Her stay at the rectory was therefore limited, and she felt as she had felt at boarding school two or three weeks before she was due to leave for good. She was delighted, but there was room in her heart for a grain of sentiment. She was beginning to discover qualities about the house and about her parents which she had overlooked or insufficiently appreciated hitherto. But her sentimentality was not of a nature to be imposed upon.

Her impatience would have returned and, indeed, become more acute, if anything had arrived to upset her plans.

We have already seen how Marc liked to read the chief items of news to his wife as she poured out the tea. He may thus unknowingly have been carrying on another tradition of the rectory, where one likes to think that Marc's predecessors reserved for themselves the right to impart the day's happenings to their womenfolk.

"It's all about the Russians," said Marc, peering over the side of his paper, "whether they are going to start a new war."

"I like the little news better," said Mrs. Dale. "The big news is always the same."

"You mean the snippets," said Marc, turning back to the home page. "Here's a merchant at Liverpool who has just been arrested for stealing corn and wheat from American grain ships, and disposing of it at high prices to the Black Market."

"The wicked man!" said Mrs. Dale, feelingly. "I hope they punish him! Philippa, my dear, I'm sure this butter is rancid."

"It's your fault," answered Philippa. "You should buy a refrigerator."

"How can I afford a refrigerator?" asked Mrs. Dale, plaintively. "How can anybody afford anything except the 'spivs' and the Black Market people? What else does it say, Marc?"

"About what?" asked Marc, who had taken advantage of this interlude to do a little reading on his own. "About the man in Liverpool? Let me see! It says that the police are already on the tracks of all sorts of people who bought the grain from him. Other arrests are expected shortly."

"They always say that," grumbled Mrs. Dale, "but I notice they never arrest anybody. The police are bribed. That's what it is. Besides, the shopkeepers don't want this wicked business to come to an end. On Saturday, when I asked Fred, the butcher's assistant (it appears he runs a car of his own, and I ask you: Where does he get the petrol from?), for a joint, he said: 'No, dearie (that's how they talk to one these days), we haven't a piece of beef in the place,' so I took those three miserable cutlets we had on Sunday, and the rest of the ration in vague bits and pieces for a shepherd's pie . . ."

"Shepherd's pie is excellent," said the rector, glancing back at the newspaper.

"That's not the point," pursued Mrs. Dale. "Before I left the butcher's a horribly vulgar woman came in and called out: 'Fred, have you got my Sunday joint ready?' 'Yes, madame,' he answered, 'It's waiting for you.' 'And is it English?' 'Best English beef,' he said, and she put a ten shilling note in his fist before going to the cashier. I felt like reporting her."

"But afterwards," put in Philippa, who had been with her mother that morning, "when you went to Black's, and they gave us the extra ounce of butter, you didn't say 'No.' Or the corn flakes!"

"Your father needs the corn flakes for his breakfast," said Mrs. Dale. "You know he always has them."

Marc coughed guiltily.

"I'm afraid we all do it," he said, meekly. "Even my tobacconist keeps cigarettes under the counter for his old customers. I've heard him lie appallingly. It's very distressing for a clergyman. I hardly like to refuse his cigarettes, but when I take them I condone his lie. However, I tell myself that it's a form of politeness rather than

a deliberate untruth, for the man is thoroughly honest."

"He's not thoroughly honest if he lies," said Philippa.
"There are not two ways of being honest."

"It's the system which is at fault rather than the individual," said Marc.

"Oh, Daddy, how can you say that?" exclaimed Philippa heatedly. "And you a clergyman!"

Marc was about to answer when Doris appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

"Please, mum," she announced, "it's Mr. Eadie to see the rector."

"Thank you, Doris," answered Mrs. Dale.

It was proof of Mrs. Dale's authority in the house that even when the maid had a message for the rector it was addressed to her.

"I must go," said Marc. "It's about a baptism."

He laid his napkin on the table and pushed back his chair, leaving his wife and daughter to finish their meal alone.

Marc found old Eadie bending over a row of hyacinths in the front garden. They talked a moment about spring and the fact that the fine weather seemed to be coming earlier than usual this year, and then walked slowly as far as the main road, where they fell upon Abe, who had just arrived in his small van with an apprentice plasterer and some building material.

At the sight of all this paraphernalia, Marc smiled contentedly. There were few things (except writing his books) which he enjoyed better than a morning, especially a fine sunny morning, gossiping with his old cronies. The fact that Abe had brought ladders and ropes meant that he was about to tackle the buttress in a spirited way. That, in

itself, was satisfying. While the boy was emptying the van, the three men walked into the churchyard, and Abe was now asked his opinion about the fine weather which had started so much earlier than usual.

"It's bad," said old Eadie, "the fruit blossom will come out early and be nipped."

"It doesn't follow," objected Abe; "a fine spring can be followed by a fine summer. That's the way it goes now—all fine or all wet."

They continued thus, arguing about seasons over the last forty years, till the lad, having brought everything along, placed the ladder against the side of the church.

Abe made a movement as if to mount it, but, suddenly changing his mind, said with the forthrightness of a man who has been thinking about something for hours, wondering if he will have the courage, when the moment is right, to get it off his chest.

"Rector, my boy is in love with your daughter, and they want you to marry them at Easter."

Old Eadie looked up and said:

"That's fine news, though I'd heard rumours of it. I reckon they were made for each other, don't you, rector?"

The rector looked at the little group facing him—old Eadie, Abe and Abe's apprentice. He glanced towards the yew tree as if he had hoped his wife might make a providential appearance from the direction of the highway, but what caught his eye was his son's grave, upon which spring flowers were making blotches of bright colour.

Seeing that his audience was waiting for an answer, he said in a firm voice:

"If the young people are decided to get married, I shall marry them."

Abe held out his hand, a rough hand on which the blue veins were very apparent, and said:

"Thank you, rector. Johnny said that he and your daughter would not think they were properly married if you didn't marry them."

"Did he say that?" asked the rector.

This confidence had touched him, and there was a lump in his throat.

"Easter will be a pretty nice time for the wedding," said old Eadie, thinking of the notes that, under his direction, would burst out from the organ pipes to fill the church, decorated more profusely than usual for so important a ceremony.

"Me and Mrs. Fairchild were married at Easter," said Abe, looking at the square tips of his boots. "That was before your time, rector, six years before you came."

"I know, I know," said the rector.

He was trying to do a little quiet thinking, but the organist and the builder kept on talking. He had guessed all along that Philippa would end by having her own way. Girls were even more tenacious than boys when they had an idea in their heads. Philippa was like Margaret, though Margaret seldom cared to admit it, and nothing ever made Margaret change her mind when once she believed she was right. But in this matter, though he sided with Margaret, he knew that neither of them could do anything about it. After all, they had merely registered the fact that in their opinion Johnny was not the boy most likely to make the girl happy. Philippa's show of independence the other night, when she had gone out, slamming the door, in response to a telephone call, had made it clear what was coming. Marc felt himself submerged by events, as his parish was submerged by the artificial lake, as the church

was being submerged by the Research Station, and as the men in the government were submerged by problems which had grown too large for them. Important people were always giving way, even though it was against their consciences. The wisest thing was to make the best of it and, after all, it was nice of Johnny to attach so much importance to being married at the church. One had to be thankful for things like that these days. So many young people had no morals at all.

Old Eadie had offered a cigarette to Abe (the rector, as we have seen, being deep in thought), but now that Marc had come down from the clouds, he was offered a cigarette, too. The three men lit up, and a holiday spirit seemed to have come over them. In different circumstances they might have celebrated with three pints of bitter.

They talked about children and the anxiety they give, though no anxiety is as bad as when they are ill. Then Abe pointed to the wall of the church, which was of stone, and said:

"That crack, rector, goes right up to the top."

"Is it very serious?" asked Marc.

"Not so serious as it can't be put right," answered Abe, trying to convey the idea that one good turn deserves another. "It's the heavy traffic that does it. Nothing can stand up against those five-ton lorries."

"I'm trying to see just where the crack goes," said the rector, shading his eyes. "It would appear to stop just below the Burne Jones window in the triforium."

"That's about right," answered Abe.

"Why don't we go inside and have a look?" suggested Eadie.

"With the ladder?" queried Abe.

"No," answered Eadie, who knew his church even

better than the rector. "We can climb by the belfry steps and walk along the gallery. There's a platform."

"Yes," said Marc, "there's a platform. I went up there the other day to clean the window. The birds make such a mess."

"I know the place you mean," said Abe, taking a last puff at his cigarette. "Bring my bag, son."

He carried his personal tools, as his father and grandfather had done, in a carpet bag of bright colours.

The procession moved round by the back of the church, and when it reached the porch, the three men and the boy rubbed their shoes on the worn mat before crossing the threshold. Old Eadie asked:

"Shall I lead, rector?"

"Certainly," answered Marc.

They followed Eadie in silence.

It was rather dark on the stairs, the edges of which were dangerously worn, and from time to time when old Eadie hesitated, the rector, Abe and the apprentice bumped into each other like the wagons of a goods train when the locomotive makes a sudden halt. Their progress became even more difficult on the balcony, though by now their eyes were accustomed to the attenuated light. Suddenly old Eadie exclaimed:

"Lordie, Mr. Dale, take care!"

"Lordie!" was a favourite expression of old Eadie's because in his family, from the earliest recollected times, it had been considered genteel, in spite of its obvious irreverence.

Marc was not able to prevent himself stumbling against the object which had inspired Eadie's warning. He exclaimed, in turn, with a touch of annoyance:

"Who on earth put this sack against the beams? It

could fall into the nave and kill somebody."

"I've never seen it before," answered Eadie.

He was smarting under Marc's aggrieved tone, which he felt certain had been directed against him personally.

Marc lifted the sack and heaved it farther back into the darkness of the platform.

"Who could have put it up here?" he queried again. "Do you know anything about it, Abe?"

Abe, who had been in the rear with the apprentice, now came forward and said:

"I never saw nothing the last time I was here, rector, except mice and cobwebs."

He was passing his gnarled hands up and down the sack, trying to guess what was inside. At first he thought it might be a sandbag. The Burne Jones window had been protected in this way during the war, but the sandbags had been on the outside, and he had taken them all away on a lorry eighteen months ago. Besides, the sack did not contain sand. Sand settles down till it becomes hard, like stone. Whatever was in here moved like grain.

"Let's open it," said Eadie, trying to unravel the knot which closed the orifice.

"Wait!" said Abe, fumbling in his waistcoat pocket. "I've got a penknife."

He cut through the twine and, plunging a hand inside, brought out a cascade of golden sweet corn.

"As pretty as sovereigns!" he exclaimed in admiration, for he was old enough to remember seeing gold pieces.

"It's a silly place to put corn," said Marc. "I'm surprised the rats haven't been at it. Is there anybody else but us, Eadie, who could have given orders to put this sack up here?"

"Nobody but Mrs. Dale," answered Eadie, who was not

sorry to throw the responsibility back, if not to the rector, at least to the rector's family.

"Oh, but why should she?" cried Marc. "She has all the room in the world to store a sack of corn. There's the rectory and the outhouses and . . ."

Abe, who was methodical, had been groping about at the far end of the platform. At first, finding nothing, he had passed his fingers over the lower part of the stained glass window to see if he could feel anything of the crack. He was a short man, and the window was rather high. He remembered vaguely leaving a bucket here during the air raids, and he thought it would be just the thing to stand on. Suddenly he came across another sack, a full sack, like the other one. He cried out:

"Here's another!"

"And another!"

"And another!"

The little group arrived at each new cry, and after a while they discovered that all were full of the same golden corn whose colour seemed even more magnificent under the Burne Jones window.

"How long could they have been here?" asked the rector anxiously.

"Not long," said Abe. "You said it yourself: the rats would have been at the bottom."

"We had better take them down," said Marc.

"Oh, no," cried Eadie, who read detective stories, and knew that the body must never be moved. "We mustn't do that. We must leave everything exactly as it is. You must go to the police station and tell Sergeant Gimminy, rector!"

Marc was vexed by this turn of events. Old Eadie struck him suddenly as a trouble maker, whose appetite for malig-

nant gossip was worse, or at least as bad, as that of a char-woman. Personally, he would have kicked the sacks down the stairs. He disliked the idea of his church becoming the object of gossip.

The apprentice was leaning over the rail, looking with fascination at the tattered flags.

Abe said:

"It must have needed a strong man to bring these sacks up here. Perhaps there were two men. When do you suppose they did it? In the day, or at night?"

"Not in the day," said Eadie sharply. "I would have seen them."

"If it was at night," said Abe, "whoever did it must have shown them how to get here."

Eadie answered angrily:

"You're not suggesting that's me?"

This was too much for Marc, who said peremptorily:

"I think we ought to go over to the rectory and see Mrs. Dale. After all, she may know something about it, although I still don't see why she should have given orders to store grain here."

They filed down the stone steps, and all marched across to the rectory, where Mrs. Dale received her husband's visit with astonishment.

"Marc!" she exclaimed, "anybody would think you were heading a deputation!"

She expected him to laugh. He answered:

"Margaret, we are puzzled about some sacks of corn on the platform in the triforium."

And he told her all about their discovery, adding:

"Eadie thinks we should tell the police. What do you say, Margaret?"

"We really came over to find out, first, Mrs. Dale, if

you had given orders to somebody to take it there?" said old Eadie, twisting his cap. He was intimidated by Mrs. Dale.

"No," answered Mrs. Dale, "I never do anything without telling my husband."

Old Eadie winced as if he had been reprimanded in school.

Mrs. Dale, having administered this rebuff (she was ferociously loyal to her husband), said more graciously:

"I think you are right, Mr. Eadie, in suggesting that my husband should go to the police, for if the person who put the sacks there did not intend to come back for them he would not have chosen such a good hiding place."

"That's right," said Abe, "if he had just wanted to dump them somewhere he would have thrown them over the wall of the churchyard."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Dale, "and as Mr. Fairchild appears to be of the opinion that at least two men are involved, the consequences might be serious. Supposing, for example, they were armed?"

"Gangsters!" said old Eadie.

Abe said:

"How do we know that there are not dozens of sacks hidden everywhere? Even here, in the rectory?"

Mrs. Dale could not help making a sudden movement of the hips as if she might be sitting on something explosive. Was it possible that the rectory might become an armed fortress? No, really! But she reiterated with feminine objectiveness.

"They *will* come back, perhaps in the night. We cannot allow the church to be desecrated. If we move the sacks and store them elsewhere, without telling anybody, we are receivers of stolen goods."

"That's right," said Abe.

"How do we know there's not more than grain inside?" asked old Eadie, who was so proud to have one suggestion adopted by Mrs. Dale that he was now anxious to cap this success with another. "How do we know that there's not arms hidden inside?"

Marc made another gesture of impatience. His wife's sensible reasoning had convinced him that he would be obliged to report the incident. As she said, the thieves would return, probably in the night. But the affair depressed him. Old Eadie and Abe were obviously enjoying every moment, Eadie especially. But Abe was nearly as bad, and to think that he was being forced to give his daughter to Abe's son! There was not only all this, but he had the feeling that he was being deprived of the joy, of the immense inward happiness, or having faith in humanity. Ever since he had come to the rectory he had left his church open at night for the strangers who pass by. He had trusted everybody in a world where nobody could be trusted any longer. To-day it was four miserable sacks of corn. To-morrow it would be worse. While he and his family slept, thieves would wrench open the poor box chained since mediæval days to the font. To-morrow the church ornaments would be stolen, as they were being stolen in so many churches. After that where would it cease? He remembered that story in the newspaper last autumn about a black mass. What had happened to the world? Here was he, Marc Dale, on the point of being involved in all sorts of trouble because he was too trustful."

While he was thinking about these things (Mrs. Dale was talking to the men), Philippa came in through the garden door with a bunch of golden daffodils. How pretty and

young she looked! He smiled at her, in spite of his sorrow. She said:

"Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't know you were busy!"

"Come in," said Marc. "You must give us your advice. We have just stumbled on the strangest discovery in the church."

"In the church?" queried Philippa, putting her daffodils on the table.

"Yes," said Marc. "Four sacks of corn. We think they were stolen."

"It sounds like the story you were reading us at breakfast!" she exclaimed.

"Why, so it does!" said Mrs. Dale. "I quite forgot."

She turned to Abe, who was nearest her, and asked:

"Did you read the story in the paper this morning?"

"No," answered Abe, "I never read the newspaper till after my supper."

Philippa wondered anxiously if Abe had yet said anything to her father about Johnny.

Old Eadie woke up from a momentary daydream and exclaimed:

"You mean the story about the grain merchant in Liverpool who was arrested for stealing corn or something from the Yankee ships? Lordie!"

He turned victoriously on Marc.

"Rector, if you ask my opinion, we've unearthed something very serious, something sensational!"

"I tell you I don't read my paper till after supper," said Abe. "What's that got to do with them sacks?"

Marc, to prevent the two men from quarrelling, said quietly:

"The suggestion is, Abe, that this grain merchant, having stolen the wheat or the corn in the docks, disposed

of it to the Black Market, and that the police have discovered many members of his organisation."

"It's happening all the time," said Abe.

"What we've found," said Eadie, "is conclusive."

"Where did you find the sacks?" asked Philippa.

"That, my dear, is the strangest part of the business," answered Mrs. Dale. "It was in the triforium, wasn't it, Marc?"

"Yes," answered Marc, turning to his daughter. "On that platform under the Burne Jones window. We always imagined nobody knew that place but ourselves."

Philippa turned pale. Fear was gripping her.

"That's right," old Eadie was saying. "Somebody must have shown it to them. Somebody who knew the church as well as we know it. And it isn't the rector, or Mrs. Dale, or Abe or me. And since the sexton passed away, who else is there? Well, Bill Gimminy will have to find that out. He's always complaining that nothing exciting comes his way. Lordie, rector, won't all this make a to-do?"

"Yes," put in Abe, "it will certainly make a lot of tongues wag. Still, it ain't our fault, is it?"

"Couldn't you wait—just a little while?" asked Philippa, turning to her father. "I mean, surely you shouldn't go to the police until—until you've asked everybody."

She turned to Abe.

"You agree, don't you, Mr. Fairchild?"

He looked at her and thought she was prettier than he had noticed of late. His son had certainly chosen a pretty girl. But, like all young women, she was sentimental about a lot of dangerous men who would not hesitate to use force if anybody discovered them in the church at night. Besides

which, the whole question had been discussed at length, and they were all agreed that, for their own tranquility (for their own safety, perhaps) the matter must be reported to Bill Gimminy. And now he would have to drive the rector into town, and at two o'clock he had promised to repair the neighbouring cathedral (he specialised in ancient monuments), and all this would hardly give him time for lunch, and Mrs. Fairchild had said there would be roast pork.

Philippa's eyes were waiting for an answer. They were strangely large and disturbing. He muttered:

"Don't worry, my dear."

Then, as if to express an affectionate contempt for all young and pretty women, he added:

"Your father knows best."

"Oh, And I was forgetting all about the baptism!" exclaimed old Eadie. "But that can wait, can't it, rector?"

Philippa looked at him angrily. She sensed that he was responsible for the trouble. The men rose to go, and quickly Philippa moved in the direction of her father, hoping for a chance to speak to him alone. She was not sure what she would say, but was there not often a bond between them?

Marc moved to the door, pursued by old Eadie.

Philippa, like her mother, knew how to keep calm in an emergency, but the veins in her forehead were thumping. She could still hear Mrs. Dale saying: "It was in the triforium, wasn't it, Marc?" The triforium! Johnny and she had stood there together. On the cold stone, against the oak rafters, above the flags of Waterloo and the carved choir stalls, they had exchanged vows. Johnny had been to Liverpool! But all this was merely coincidence. Why was her heart beating so violently? He would have told her!

Eadie and her father were walking down the path now, and Abe (carrying his carpet bag), followed by his apprentice, were bringing up the rear. Mrs. Dale had hurried into the kitchen, where something was burning in the oven.

Philippa's head was splitting.

She must find Johnny at all costs. She would run until she fell down exhausted. But where? Where was he likely to be at this time of the morning? With Bill? Or at home? Or at the garage? The garage! That was the likeliest place.

She must run, run like the wind, by the short cut through the field!

She opened the garden door and tore off in the direction of the orchard.

XXIII

SHE joined the main road at the bridge, and was so out of breath with running that she rested against a beech tree which formed the corner of Ganner's wheat field. A car came along from the direction of the church, and she had only just time to hide when she recognised Abe's van.

It rattled past on its mission of irreparable harm. The doors behind had not been closed. They danced over the rough road, revealing the young apprentice seated on an upturned packing-case. Marc (she had only seen his arms and knees) was in front, next to Abe, whose square head was bent silently over the driving wheel.

In an instant the van was gone, and only the eddies of white dust told of its passing. The vision it had imprinted on her mind remained. But she could no longer do anything about it. Twice she could have prevented this dreadful journey. At the rectory, when she had first heard about it, and now, just now, when the noise of the van filled her ears. She could have thrown herself into the middle of the road. She could have allowed herself to be run over. If she had been killed, or even wounded, her father and Abe would have forgotten about going to the police station.

All her good ideas came too late to be of any use. If the van had taken longer to come along the road, she could have prepared herself for the sacrifice. Now the van had certainly reached the first shops in the High Street.

In a minute or two it would have drawn up under the blue lamp of the police station.

So far she had been taking it for granted that Johnny was guilty. But she was not certain. The urge to warn him was instinctive. It was no more planned beforehand than the act of a person who plunges into the river because he sees a head bobbing up and down. There remained the possibility that Johnny had absolutely nothing to do with the sacks of corn found in the triforium. She uttered a quick prayer that this might indeed be the case, and started off again on her wild run to the garage. As she ran, the fear that he was guilty became once more uppermost, and she imagined that the police might even arrive at the garage before she did. On the other hand, would anybody, besides herself, connect Johnny with the affair? She was in a state of not knowing what to think.

The first thing she saw when she ran into the garage was the lorry with its bonnet off. She must have looked wild-eyed and dishevelled, but her first tangible impression was of being seized by Johnny between his elbows (his hands and wrists were covered in oil) and being kissed violently, for it was the lunch hour, and there was nobody about but himself. Half a dozen questions had been hovering about her mind, but they became forgotten in this sudden embrace. At first she was annoyed, because she had sworn not to let anything of the kind happen till she knew whether he was guilty or not, but Johnny, being the stronger, had not asked her permission, and now, as always happened between them, the physical compatibility overwhelmed everything else, and her mental unhappiness melted as if under a healthgiving ray.

Afterwards she drew herself up as if for combat and said in a low, intent voice:

"Your father and mine were at the church this morning . . ."

A joyful expectation was all over his face, and he broke in on her with a double query:

"Then it's all right? You overheard them?"

"No, no, it isn't that," she answered feverishly.

He had put her off her stride, and she continued with less acridity:

"Johnny, something terrible has happened. Your father took Daddy up to the triforium to look at a crack in the stonework . . ."

She was looking at him anxiously to watch the slightest change in expression.

" . . . they went to the very spot where we sat the other night when it was raining."

She was hesitating, because Johnny, though his smile had gone, did not reveal any outward sign of embarrassment.

"Johnny! Those sacks of corn . . .?"

Her eyes fixed him, imploring a favourable answer, but as he swallowed hard, trying vainly to say something, she guessed the worst, and seeing him in front of her, strong and in no immediate danger, every sentiment but a wild rage that he had duped her, flew out of her heart and drawing her head back, uncontrollably quivering, she hissed:

"Admit you put them there!"

"I put them there," he conceded, "but . . ."

"Oh, I don't want any 'but'," she cried. "You've soiled the place where we pledged our word. I cannot yet believe it."

In a moment he had recovered his self control and answered angrily:

"Don't start building up a whole lot of stupid suppositions. I put them there to get somebody out of a jam. By to-night they would have gone."

"Who was in a jam?"

"The whole thing doesn't add up to anything important. Ganner sold a side of bacon without permission, and the police put a man to watch his place. He didn't want us to bring the corn round till they had gone. Are you satisfied?"

"Of course I'm not satisfied," she answered. "Your excuse doesn't make sense. A man like you, a man like I thought you were, does not mock a place which is . . . sacred!"

She was not quite sure in her fury whether the triforium was the more sacred by its situation in a religious edifice, or by the fact it was there that she and Johnny had held hands and murmured nervously their love. But both reasons were sacred. He had defiled her heart and her religion.

"All the way to Liverpool and all the way back," he countered. "I was thinking so much about you that when Bill asked me . . ."

"So Bill was in this too?"

"Not really. He couldn't think of anywhere to hide the corn. That's how I remembered what you said about the smugglers."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, horrified. "In other words, on that night—that night it rained—the only thing that interested you was what I said about the smugglers!"

"No," he answered, in despair at not being able to make himself understood. "We did nothing as wrong as you think."

"Don't let's talk about Bill," she said. "I didn't

empty my heart to Bill. I didn't show him the place where I go to pray when I want to be alone. I don't expect Bill to distinguish between what's right and what's wrong! But you, Johnny, I thought you were different. I imagined you were perfectly good!"

"But I am!" he exclaimed, looking genuinely puzzled.

"I hate you!" she cried. "I hate you because you're as cynical with me as you were with that poor child you nailed up for fun in a coffin. You've trampled my love, and in a few hours . . ."

"What's going to happen in a few hours?" he asked nervously.

Terrified by the sound of his voice, she answered:

"Your father and mine have gone to the police."

He appeared for the first time to realise the gravity of the situation, and asked:

"Why? For four miserable sacks of corn?"

"Have you seen the papers this morning?" she queried.

"No—at least, perhaps. I may have scanned the headlines."

"You didn't read, for instance, that a merchant at Liverpool had been arrested for stealing grain from American ships and disposing of it to the Black Market?"

"What's his name?" asked Johnny.

She told him.

He turned white, and after a moment's hesitation said:

"I may have guessed, but I didn't know where it came from. I had nothing to do with it. I merely hauled it like the railway might have hauled it."

"If you were so innocent, why did you hide it?" she asked, scathingly.

"One hides everything nowadays. One never knows."

"And, for the sake of making money, you would do any-

thing. Is that it? Steal? Hide the stuff in a church in the middle of the night! Lie! No, don't dare contradict me! Not telling people and lying is the same thing. I'm not sure it isn't even worse. Just now, for instance, when you kissed me, it was a lying, secretive kiss. You've always cared more about getting rich quickly than you cared about me. Success was what you wanted. Your dreams have crashed, and I'm part of the wreckage, but only part of it. In a couple of hours the police will be tramping all over the church in their big boots. There's Daddy and Mummy, who are going to look like a couple of fools when it comes out that the thief was going to marry their daughter! And your people, who gave you their savings to buy the lorry? What are they going to think?"

Her words had temporarily reduced him to shame and despair. He, his hands and wrists still black with oil, his hair disarranged, his brow furrowed, was pacing up and down the narrow space between the lorry and the cement wall of the garage, a confined corridor strewn with spanners and sparking-plugs, in which he appeared to her like a caged animal. She kept her eyes away from him for fear that he would suddenly implore her aid and that she would weaken, for she still loved him, though he had wounded her love. He had harmed it by his sacrilegious act, and if she wanted to remain good she must resolutely turn away from him. If she had been a Roman Catholic she would have gone into a convent. This solution which, in spite of her Protestant upbringing, greatly tempted her, would, if she resorted to it, merely make two wrongs instead of one. For just as it had obviously been wrong to love Johnny, so it would be wrong to abjure the religion of her ancestors. The squires and rectors of the Saxon church since Elizabethan times would rise and curse her.



Once or twice she risked a quick glance sideways at him. He was obviously trying to think out a plan, but, he had never been good at marshalling his thoughts logically. He was not her equal in argument, whether heated or calculative. As he had told her a dozen times, he was a man of action and not of mental agility: he had not spent his years of adolescence, as she had, reading strange, disturbing books chosen haphazard in a scholar's library. From breakfast time to going to bed at night her ears took in the precise language of an Oxford don and his wife, the daughter of a don. Words were their business. In moments of elation or anger, Philippa's sentiments flowed out like clear water.

She continued breathlessly:

"The police may be here in a few hours. Don't waste time thinking about me. I have ceased to exist in your life. I never thought you would do anything mean. I was wrong. You must start again. My illusions have gone. I'm finished. Doris and I will go on making the beds and dusting the furniture. Daddy will despise me. Can you blame him?"

He asked softly:

"What am I to do?"

The simplicity of the question took her by surprise. She answered:

"I don't know. It doesn't concern me any more."

"Have you no pity for me?"

"Pity? No. Horror!" Then: "I'm sorry for my parents. That's all. I shall never dare look them in the face again."

Johnny had taken up a piece of rag and was wiping the oil off his hands and wrists with a mechanical movement that suggested he was going to do something violent. Her

answer was so cruel, it had such a determined air, that he was certain she would not speak to him again. Philippa was on the point of collapsing, but on the surface she looked monstrosly calm, as she murmured:

"Good-bye."

He held out his hands in a final appeal.

"That is really all you have to say?"

"It would be better for all of us, better for you, better for me, better for my people, if you disappeared for a while, if you gave us time to forget the harm you've done."

"I suppose it would," he murmured.

He wondered if he dared make a final attempt to take her in his arms, to seek her lips—he was so miserable—but what would that do? The police in Liverpool would have found his name on the merchant's books. All the town would know in a few minutes about the scandal at the church. He would hear the story repeated from mouth to mouth when he left the garage. He would be questioned. Supposing he cleared himself? But how could he clear himself? He tried to look brave as he said:

"Very well. I'll go."

He threw the tools into a box, placed them inside the cab of the lorry, and left the garage without another word.

XXIV

JOHNNY set off in the direction of the caravan, but when he had left the town, instead of going by the shortest route, he made a detour by the ploughed fields on the other side of the river, for he felt the need of prolonged and violent exercise to cool down his emotions and help him decide what to do.

For the first twenty minutes his brain was in such a tempestuous state that he thought about nothing at all. Every time an idea tried to push itself forward, others scrambled over it and he forgot what the first had been about. The result was a confused murmur in his ears and a thumping behind his forehead. He walked with long, rhythmical steps. He swung his arms stiffly, and when, at last, he reached the first of the big fields he lifted up his nostrils to inhale deeply the moist country air. Here and there, dotted about the field were tiny red tractors travelling slowly but with great precision in squares which became progressively smaller, and in the furrows men were laying down chemical manure over which the rooks dived and roared with raucous cries, duped by the manure which they took for seed.

The great expanse of the field and the uneven ground gradually brought him back to a condition in which his mind functioned intelligibly. On his right, the Council was putting up long lines of prefabricated houses, and just now painters were painting all the doors in the first row.

These houses, planted as uniformly as turnips, spoilt the view. They made the same blot on the landscape as might have done a monster cemetery. Normally, whenever Johnny saw these rows of prefabs going up he turned his head the other way and felt a tinge of pity for the unfortunate people who could find nowhere better to live. They made him think with horror of some future age when the country would be divided into three equal parts—prefabs, factories, and cemetery, the State ordering about each person from the first to the last. His own aspirations had been so different. Philippa, adventure, flying fishes and cactus trees had coloured all of them. He was a romantic, a thirster after excitement, a gambler. As Philippa had said to him, he had crashed. These prefabs appeared less revolting than last time he had seen them. In summer their owners would put flowers in tiny gardens and make red roses climb up the walls. The washing would hang out on Mondays. But it was too late. He would never have a home, not even one like this. He had lost Philippa, his parents, and even his right to live. All had been lost at a single throw. He was a wanderer over a ploughed field. In an hour or two he would have become a fugitive.

This last consideration caused him to advance with less assurance. His steps became shorter, and his shoulders drooped. He would not go to the front door of the caravan, but as soon as he had crossed the river (it was narrow here, and he could swing over by the branches of the willows) he would knock at the bedroom window. For all he knew, the stranger might still be posted on the main road in front of the Research Station. Bill had told him all the details and added that he had probably gone by now, but Johnny, whilst walking, had formed a plan, and he must not be seen

until he had time to accomplish it. By now he was creeping forward, looking along both sides of the river.

Bill had returned early in the morning from a run to Bristol. That is why Johnny had been going over the engine of the lorry—changing the oil, cleaning the plugs and seeing to the tyres. Johnny was therefore fairly certain of finding his partner in the caravan. He would already have had a bit of sleep, and Prudy would have come back from the schools to make lunch.

He crossed the river and, going softly up to the back of the caravan, tapped on the window. Nothing happened. He remained for a few moments listening to the water lapping over the trunk of an elm which had fallen into the river, listening also to the beating of his heart, for he was beginning to be afraid. If the caravan was empty he might have to wait for hours hiding among the willows until Bill or Prudy came home. Beads of perspiration covered his forehead. He glanced in the direction of the church, where the police might already be tramping with heavy boots.

The window against which he had tapped—it was a skylight rather than a window—was too high for him to see through. He looked round for something to stand on and, finding the pail in which Prudy put her garbage, he turned it upside down and in a second had jerked himself up and was peering into the caravan.

They were both there. The dinner things were still on the little table at the far end (the compartment into which opened the front door). The atmosphere, as usual, was blue with cooking fats and cigarette smoke. Bill, seated on the divan, had taken Prudy on his lap. His head was bent over hers, and his hands, which were short and wide, were clasped round her swollen waist. They had been too

wrapt up in each other to hear his nervous knock. Johnny's cheeks became flushed with shame at having broken in on his friends' privacy, and he jumped down so quickly from his bucket, not to be caught prying, that he slipped against the side of the caravan, which began to rock.

Bill had leapt through the front door and, having made the round of his frail home, came face to face with his partner, who was rubbing his shins.

"Johnny!" he exclaimed. "What the devil!"

He was in his shirtsleeves, without collar or tie, but was freshly shaved, and as his features broke into a smile, he looked extraordinarily young. At the sound of the happy voice, Johnny laughed and said:

"Sorry, Bill, I slipped against the garbage can. I think I've bruised my ankle."

"Come in," said Bill. "Prudy will give you something to put on it."

"I don't need to trouble her," answered Johnny. "We can talk here. It won't take long."

Now he felt magnificently calm.

"There's been a spot of bother with those sacks of corn we put in the church," he said, bending down to pick one of the first daisies in the grass. "The rector and my old man, and a couple more busybodies stumbled up against them this morning, and went to the police."

"To the police!" echoed Bill, turning white.

"Ganner's contact at Liverpool was arrested yesterday, and there's a chunk about it in the papers. The people at the rectory must have put two and two together. The pack is in full cry!"

"You mean they may be here at any moment?" exclaimed Bill.

He looked wildly round as if seeking a way to defend his home. Now that his features had lost their good nature, there was something pitiful about him. Johnny took hold of his elbow and said:

"You haven't a thing to worry about, Bill. I've got a plan."

Bill looked up eagerly. He wanted so hard to believe that his partner had discovered a way out.

"Don't let's stay here," he whispered. "There's nothing you can't say in front of Prudy."

Johnny glanced towards the main road. He would have liked to ask Bill if the detective had gone, but it was wiser, he thought, to remain silent and give the impression he was indifferent. He therefore followed Bill to the front, where Prudy was shaking the leaves out of the teapot.

"Hullo!" she said.

As she drew herself up, framed in the narrow entrance, Johnny was surprised to see how big she had become. He turned his eyes away with adolescent bashfulness, and answered:

"Hullo, Prudy!"

Bill closed the door carefully and, without troubling to recapitulate the main events for Prudy's benefit, said:

"We're all right here. Tell us the plan!"

Johnny looked affectionately at Prudy (she was sitting on the edge of the divan, with her bigness hidden by the table) and said, with that charm which gave him such a tremendous personality:

"You know how it is, Prudy. I bought the lorry to try to help us on a bit. You and Bill would only have come into the picture if the thing had gone right. Well, the other day I did something silly. I went up to Liverpool to get some grain for Ganner, and in the evening, because

he wasn't ready to take it in, I hid it in a spot halfway up the church where Miss Dale had taken me one night when we were courting. The grain has been found. It was stolen. As I was telling Bill just now, that's my business. I bought the lorry. I carried the stuff from the docks. I hid it in the church. That leaves Bill right out of it. To give you an example. The evening I put it in the church, you and Bill went to the pictures. You remember the night you went with Bill to the pictures, don't you, Prudy?"

"But afterwards . . .?" put in Bill.

"What do I care what you did afterwards?" Johnny continued quickly. "And, anyway, I'm trying to make things clear to Prudy. I want her to understand. Look, Prudy. This evening I was going to take the lorry to Salisbury. Well, I shall take it all the same, but I won't be going to Salisbury. I shall be going some other place, and, what's more, nobody is to know where I'm going. Not for weeks. Not for months. Not for ever, maybe. So if anybody asks you or Bill who fetched the grain from Liverpool and who put it in the church, you must say: 'Johnny Fairchild owned the lorry, and he did it.' Is that clear?"

"But I don't understand," said Prudy. "What will Philippa say?"

"Philippa wants me to go," answered Johnny. "It was she who suggested it."

"When did she suggest it?" asked Prudy, suspiciously.

"Half an hour ago. She came to see me at the garage. She said—I remember her words exactly: 'It would be better for all of us, better for you, better for me, better for my people, if you disappeared for a while.'"

"And if they catch you?" asked Bill, "if they bring you back?"

"I swear before God," said Johnny, "that nobody will ever catch me. Nobody will ever bring me back. I've always wanted to go off on a long journey to some place I've never been to."

"No," said Bill after a moment's reflection. "That won't do. I sent you to Liverpool. I'm your partner. Whatever happens, I shall take half the blame."

Johnny started to walk up and down the confined space of the caravan. He tugged at the lobe of an ear, a favourite trick, and answered:

"Listen, Bill, you know what I learnt in the army? Not to sacrifice more men than you must. In a reconnaissance, for instance, if one man isn't enough, why yes, by all means, send out two, three, as many as you like. But if one, only one, can do what's needed? See what I mean! It would be crazy, wouldn't it, for you and Prudy to get yourselves into a mess for the fun of it, not even to do me any good! That's the wrong sort of heroism. In the garage just now, after Miss Dale and I had a show down, I felt pretty sick. I didn't care much what happened. But now I think there's one tiny thing I can do. I mean, there's Prudy's baby. I'll do for the kid what I would have done, without even thinking about it, for the other blokes if somebody had been needed to go out and strafe the Japs. You don't even have to feel grateful."

"I can't accept that," grumbled Bill, looking at Prudy, but Prudy did not answer. She knew, with her feminine good sense, that Johnny was right. To do anything else would be stupid.

"When would you go?" asked Bill in a heavy voice.

"As soon as it's dark," answered Johnny. "About five o'clock. The tanks are full. I've got everything I need."

"There's some hay at the back," said Bill. "I brought it from Bristol."

"It'll have to stay where it is," answered Johnny.

He turned to go, then suddenly, putting a hand in his breast pocket, pulled out a wad of notes.

"Look, Prudy," he said, "take this."

"Oh, no," she exclaimed, pushing away his arm, as if she saw something prophetic in his gesture.

"I can't use it any more," he said. "Normally the money would be in the bank, and they'd take it. But you know how things are? One doesn't trust the banks. Thank goodness for it."

"What do you want me to do with it?" she asked.

"Keep it," he answered, "not for yourself or for Bill, but for the kid. It's just lucky I happen to have it on me, otherwise it would be wasted."

Then:

"Good-bye, Bill."

"I'll come with you," said Bill.

"No, I'd rather not. I'm going back the way I came, across the river, and by the big fields."

He waved his arm and ran quickly towards the willows.

"Johnny!" cried Prudy, looking with horror at the great wad of money he had pushed into her hand.

"Johnny!"

But there was no other answer but the lapping of water against the fallen elm.

XXV

P RUDY, who was more than ten minutes late when she reached the schools, found her pupils beating their books against the desks, throwing paper darts or tugging at each other's hair. They rose guiltily. Their teacher had never been so late, and the older ones were even beginning to hope that she would not arrive at all. She walked quickly to her desk, rapped the oak sharply with the flat part of a ruler, and tried to hide the confusion in her thoughts occasioned by Johnny's visit, but she was so absent-minded that she was obliged to turn round and consult the blackboard to discover the subject of the lesson.

On the way, instead of taking the short cut by the orchard, she had crossed the field and walked along the main road between the church and the rectory, and she was almost surprised to find that they were both quite unchanged, sleeping in a warm March sun. There was not a soul in the churchyard, where a slight breeze played amongst the daffodils. On the other side of the road, the hedge bordering the path which led to the rectory kitchen was now the tenderest green, and in the moss underneath there were primroses.

Once or twice, as she hurried along, she tried to argue that after a short absence Johnny would come back and everything would go on again as usual. There were points in his story which needed clearing up, and, most of all, those which concerned the love of Philippa and Johnny,

which until this moment had seemed of the kind which nothing in this world could undo. But then she had been told nothing of the events which Johnny had mentioned—the meeting between himself and Philippa in the church, and his return from Liverpool the night she and Bill had gone to the pictures. That was the day they had first seen the stranger whose presence on the high road had made such an impression on Bill.

She wished now that she had insisted on knowing more about her husband's business. Two brains are better than one. From the start of their marriage Bill, when it came to talking about certain things, had intimidated her. He imagined it a male privilege to keep secrets, whereas if she had taken the trouble, as quite a number of married women do take the trouble, she would undoubtedly have broken down what was nothing else but a bachelor habit. She was wrong not to have chivied him till he had told her why he had panicked at the sight of the stranger, and where he had gone afterwards that he should come back looking so relieved. But she was lazy. It had been so much easier to let Bill have his silences, not to ask questions when he came home with a frown, to pet him and give him the impression that outside teaching arithmetic and spelling to little girls, she was of inferior intelligence. Now, in spite of Johnny's courageous action in taking all the blame, the future was dismally uncertain. Bill would have to look for another job. She would have him on her hands in the caravan, smoking too many cigarettes, preaching economy, worrying about a dozen different things, less sure of himself, angry perhaps that she was going to have the baby at such an awkward time. What a long way was all this from the cottage with the bow window and the flowers in the garden!



But if these were the first selfish considerations, there were others no less terrifying. Since she had taught in the schools, and even more since she and Bill had made their home in the caravan, the church and the rectory had seemed full of good counsel and protection. The schools gave her financial independence. The church was eternal. Her mother was buried in the churchyard. The rectory, with its romantic appearance, its many rooms and beautiful garden, was a comforting background to the smallness of the caravan, which rocked in the slightest wind.

Most of all, there was Philippa, whose companionship (originally sought after perhaps, because of Bill's silences) had become by now a necessity to her intellectual happiness. What Prudy had found in Philippa was a traditional erudition quite a different business from the scholastic cramming which had made Prudy a good teacher. Philippa's knowledge was not of the scholastic kind. It was surprising and irregular, and covered all she did and said, like the wild rose sprawls without method over the hedge. That anything should happen to Philippa to make her disillusioned in love (and anything Philippa did had an almost religious depth which proved to what extent she was different from the popular idea of how her generation thought and acted) was enough to make Prudy more than afraid for the future. The multiplication tables this afternoon prevented Prudy from flying across to the rectory. For the first time she would have liked to send the class into the fields to look for wild flowers till night drove them home. Her heart beat violently as she imagined vital things taking place whilst her pupils continued their mechanical chanting. She felt heavy also, heavier than of late, and just now, worried as she was, her head was turning and she felt sick. Bill, who could never keep quiet

whilst uncertainty was in the air, had perhaps left the caravan in spite of her urgent plea, before she had left him, to remain where he was. Nervously, she took her ruler and banged the side of the desk: "Now, children, be attentive, and begin all over again . . ."

She dismissed the class two minutes before time, saying that the clock was slow, and hurried down the road, refreshed by the cool dampness of late afternoon, but suddenly nervous about trying to see Philippa when there might be strangers in the house.

"Shall I? Shall I not?" she repeated.

When she reached the lane she turned down it as easily as if there had never been any hesitation in her mind, and tapped on the kitchen window. Unconsciously she had found an excuse to justify her visit if Mrs. Dale had been there, but it was Philippa, with a kettle in her hand, who looked over the sink.

"Come in, Prudy," she said, sliding open the window.

Her eyes were red, and her voice not quite the same. Prudy answered:

"No, thanks. I must run. I merely thought I would say good evening in passing."

Then, casually:

"Johnny came along to the caravan lunch-time. He stayed quite a while."

"Oh?"

The query revealed so much repressed interest that Prudy knew that her instinct had been right to bring her to the rectory, but to make Philippa talk she decided to discuss her own troubles, how she was feeling heavier and more depressed than at any time since she had been expecting the child. Philippa, who always sympathised with her friend's condition, counted the months all over again,

though she had done this a score of times, enquired about the various symptoms, and even suggesting telephoning for the doctor, though obviously there was nothing the doctor could do. It was only when Prudy refused categorically to see Dr. Sullivan, and reiterated that, after all, it was quite normal and she could manage, that Philippa put the kettle on the fire, and, going out into the porch, looking over Prudy towards the horses in the field, asked:

"So you saw Johnny just now?"

"Yes," answered Prudy. "He was magnificent. He told us about some sacks of corn your father discovered in the church. Apparently it's very serious, but Johnny said he would take all the blame and go away, miles away!"

"He's bound to take the blame," answered Philippa. "It wasn't Bill's idea."

"I don't know about that," answered Prudy, "but Bill wouldn't have looked so relieved if he hadn't had something to do with it. Besides, the morning the grain was hidden, Bill got up at five."

"Johnny should have known better," said Philippa, doggedly.

"You mean," said Prudy, "that Bill hasn't a conscience worth talking about? What makes it so terrible for me is that Bill, sheltering behind Johnny, is less of a man."

"That's silly," said Philippa.

"I know it's silly," answered Prudy, "and unreasonable, but it is just one more illusion gone."

"And *my* illusions?" asked Philippa bitterly. "Don't you think they have gone?"

"I don't know," Prudy answered. "I mean I don't know enough what Johnny did. But just now, in the caravan, Johnny was wonderful. I felt as I might have felt if

I'd seen a man jumping into the sea to rescue somebody."

"It's a little late for Johnny to be brave!" exclaimed Philippa.

"All the same," said Prudy, "to be loved once by a man like Johnny . . ."

Philippa looked up quickly.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't think it's safe to talk like this on the doorstep," said Prudy. "Besides, I must go back to Bill. What a night I'm going to have!"

Philippa gripped her friend's arm.

"Where's Johnny going?" she asked in a whisper.

"I don't know," answered Prudy. "He said to us: 'Nobody is to know where I'm going. Not for weeks. Not for months. Not for ever, maybe.'"

There was a heavy pause.

"When's he going?"

"To-night when it's dark. He's going to drive the lorry out of the garage, and disappear."

The two young women were on the steps. Their breathing was as one. They were closer in thought than they had ever been.

They remained thus for a moment, how long neither of them knew. Then Prudy said:

"So long, darling. I must go."

They kissed each other, a thing they had never done before.

The kettle was whistling on the stove.

Philippa, lifting it almost savagely, scalded the teapot which stood with the milk and the cups and saucers on a tray. A plain-clothes man from the town, in response to Marc's visit to the police station, had arrived at the rectory

half an hour earlier, and Mrs. Dale had asked her daughter to bring some tea into the study.

At this request Philippa had turned white. Her situation had become so untenable that, rushing out into the kitchen, she had sobbed. It was a moment later that Prudy had knocked at the window.

Now that Prudy had gone, her anger returned. It was inconceivable that her parents thought it necessary to offer tea to this man who, whether they realised it or not, was bringing disaster into their lives! Their stupidity enraged her. Her hands shook as she opened the tea canister, but unconsciously her mind was beginning to dissect the information which Prudy had brought, and something warned her that she must control herself, at any rate until after nightfall so that nothing she did or said might endanger Johnny's get-away.

The idea that she could be useful to Johnny steadied her nerves. When she had made the tea she looked round to be sure that everything was in its right place on the tray, and her steps, as she crossed the hall, were unhurried. When she entered the study, Mrs. Dale rose from her chair by the window, and clearing some books and the evening paper from a low table, exclaimed:

"That's charming of you, my dear. Put it here."

The unctuous tone of her voice revived Philippa's anger, and the cups and saucers shook as the tray touched the mahogany table.

"I do hope there's nothing we've forgotten to tell you," Mrs. Dale went on, turning to the police inspector. "Of course, you must call on Mr. Fairchild and Mr. Eadie. Mr. Eadie lives less than two minutes' walk away in Buffalo Lane."

"I had better take down his address," said the inspec-

tor, pulling out his notebook and pencil again. He had come from the county town and was not as familiar with the locality as Sergeant Gimminy.

"You'll find Mr. Eadie very helpful. He's the organist and one of my husband's most faithful workers. Do you take both milk and sugar with your tea?"

"A little," said the inspector nervously.

"Is that for the sugar or the milk?" asked Mrs. Dale.

"A little milk, and one lump if you can spare it, please."

Philippa was standing with her back to the bookshelf, her eyes drilling little holes of hatred into the police inspector, whose clean face, falsely refined accent and nicotine-stained fingers infuriated her.

"Philippa, my dear, do pass the sugar to the inspector. Marc, are you sure there's nothing else we ought to mention?"

Philippa switched her attention to her father curled up uncomfortably in his high-backed chair, and for a fraction of a second, as their eyes met, Philippa saw him squirm.

"How he must be suffering!" she thought.

The wry smile which was Marc's only answer to his wife's question would have been sufficient to prove how distasteful this tea party was to him. Patient, harmless Marc, how much he would have preferred to forget about the four sacks of corn and get on with his work! By one more of those sympathetic waves which so often passed between them, he and Philippa understood that they were secretly in league against Mrs. Dale and the intruder, but this time it was too late. No good could come out of their alliance. Both were beaten by the speed of events.

The inspector had now finished his interview.

"I think I'll have another look at the church," he said.

" Thanks for your help, Mrs. Dale."

" It's never right to let a crime go unpunished," she answered simply.

This was her creed, that creed which, in part, she had instilled into Philippa. There are no two ways of being good. But her cold logic was at this moment so cruel that Philippa thought.

" I wonder if Johnny isn't the better of the two? He is doing something brave."

She had scarcely given silent expression to this sentiment, than she realised that her judgment was undergoing a change. To Prudy, half an hour earlier, she had said: " It's a little late for Johnny to be brave!"

While Mrs. Dale was still speaking to the inspector, Philippa slipped out of the study and hurried to the kitchen. Automatically, as she passed through the hall, she put on the electric light. This gesture, which she did every evening, did not strike her as strange until, upon entering the kitchen, she ran to close the window. Outside there was a moon and the sky was full of stars.

" It's dark! It's dark!" she exclaimed.

She was suddenly overcome with foreboding.

XXVI

JOHNNY, after leaving the caravan, walked briskly across country. He had quite shaken off the feeling of fear which at one time made him cut such a pitiful figure. He held his head magnificently erect and quite enjoyed the beating of the wind against his cheeks, and the smell of earth newly turned by the plough. One of his strong points was the ease with which he could spring back after the worst blow. When Philippa had attacked him in the garage he was too surprised, too utterly dizzy to do more than walk out blindly into the crowded street. This state of mind lasted until he had seen the effect of the bad news on his partner's face. Then he was ashamed, monstrously ashamed, as if he had lost control of his nerves in the jungle in front of his men. He lied when he told Bill he had a plan. The plan only took shape as he was talking to Prudy, but as he talked to her, as the plan grew more grandiose, more unselfish, he felt better. He had always had a contempt for danger. He was a real gambler, not the sort who grumble and sulk when they lose their throw. Life must be worth living, or it was better not to live. He must have the woman he loved, or cut his losses. There was something virile, he thought, in a man bravely cutting his losses. What disgusted him was those people who only half lived, who accepted everything for fear they would have to make an effort. Even now he was not really ashamed of anything he had done. There had been an

accident. He was like a man who, half way to his objective, had stepped on a mine. Everything had blown up at once. That was just bad luck. On second thoughts—this return across the fields to town was a journey of second thoughts!—the Council could keep their prefabs. He would not live in one even if he were offered a second throw. Once again, as on the day he first loved Philippa, it would have to be everything or nothing. That was his creed.

But though his morale was rising, he had not forgiven Philippa for the way she had attacked him in the garage. He was not sure that he did not hate her. When a man is wounded, when he gets into trouble, all his system cries out for the girl he loves. That is what women are for—to comfort and soothe when things go wrong. But Philippa had sat in judgment on him and then struck. He should, of course, have told her about putting the sacks in the church, but how easily could she have said to her father, and to all those people fussing and gossiping in the rectory: "Oh, I know all about those sacks. There's no mystery. I asked Johnny Fairchild to put them there." That would have put an end to their trouble-making!

Johnny went on like this for quite a time, working himself up as if he were attacking her in a court of law. She had accused him. Now, it was his turn. He tried to be fair. He admitted that when the sacks were found, she might not immediately have guessed who put them there. But no, this was no defence! She must have known: otherwise she would not have rushed off in such a state to the garage. Women are so quick to put two and two together. Thus, she could have saved him with a perfectly harmless lie. He had always believed that she would do more than lie to help him.

Having this immense, absurd confidence is one of the most beautiful things about being in love. Every time during his journeys Johnny had the tiniest accident, like knocking his head or bruising his arm, it used to amuse him to think how Philippa would make a fuss of him if she knew, and he was always tempted to send her a telegram: "Hurt myself. Come quickly" for the joy of seeing her arrive by the next train, all upset, thinking he was near to death! She had always struck him as having a depth of gentleness and sympathy.

Of course, in one way, he was almost grateful for this opportunity to hate her because if she had flown to his side, all full of her love, their parting would have been so immensely cruel that he might not have had the strength to carry through with it. Whereas now, he was glad to go. This journey into the unknown was an adventure. It was a terrible but romantic end to his career.

He hesitated about saying goodbye to his parents, but the part his father had played in the discovery of the corn embittered him, and he was afraid that his mother might guess there was something wrong if he threw himself into her arms—he who, by nature, was always so undemonstrative! Perhaps there was a third reason, more important. The police, though they might not have anything against him, could ask him to come round for a talk (if, indeed, this was the way they acted; he knew nothing about police procedure), and he must not speak to anybody. That was imperative.

So the thing to do was to go on walking till it was dark.

When night came he would wander into the garage as if nothing had happened, and calmly drive out with the lorry.

Fortunately, even the tanks were full. That again was one of the things he had learnt in the Army. As soon as the lorry came back, it was run over and made all ready for going out again. When Johnny came back from a run, Bill arrived at the garage to act as mechanic while Johnny went home to sleep, and when Bill had been out on a trip, it was the other way round. So this time, Johnny having worked all the morning, knew that everything was exactly right.

Where was he going?

There again he had an idea which fitted in with the scheme which he had unconsciously elaborated while talking to Prudy. On his travels, wherever they took place, abroad or in England, his mind was extraordinarily receptive to the sort of country through which he passed. His eyes photographed views, as certain people can remember every bump and scar on a human face. Bill was an excellent driver but he centred all his attention on the road, scanning the way ahead for other lorries or for dogs which dart so easily from unexpected places. Johnny, less prudent, swept his gaze over meadows and woods and distant sun-crested hills, and at the end of the day, when he closed his eyes, he saw them all over again like a series of picture postcards.

About a fortnight ago, on his way back from Monmouth, he had driven up a steep, winding road between magnificent forest trees and occasional pastures, and towards the top he had suddenly found himself peering over crags and boulders far, far down at the turbulent waters of the Wye. His engine had boiled over and a shepherd had told him, when he stopped for five minutes, that eagles nested on the summit and that there was a spot (which Johnny did not go to) from where one could see five counties.

This place appealed to him for two reasons—that it was savagely picturesque, and immensely lonely. But his mind, having planned thus far, went no farther. He was content for this to be so. He would be lucky if he arrived there without a hitch.

The lamps of the town were glittering in front of him when finally he passed his father's house. He was hungry and went to the café bar in Bear Lane for something hot to drink, and a ham sandwich. He found an evening paper on the table, but there was nothing about the discovery at the church. When he was passing the fried fish shop he felt as those secret agents must have felt when they were dropped into enemy-occupied countries during the war. He expected at any moment to be led away.

As soon as he reached the garage, he purposely went into the office where the owner, in dungarees, was taking a magneto to pieces.

"Hullo!" he said, looking up.

"Hullo!" answered Johnny. "What's new?"

"You mean the Test Match?" asked the garage owner.

"I haven't seen a paper."

Then, after a pause:

"Going out to-night?"

"Only up the road," lied Johnny.

Obviously, everything was just as usual. In ten minutes, at the most, he would be driving along the crowded street into the comparative safety of the arterial road. His steps echoed over the cement floor of the half-empty garage. The lorry was at the far end by the petrol pumps.

Because he had always done it, he unscrewed the radiator cap to be sure there was enough water. Then he

walked round to the other side, the side against the wall, to climb into the cab.

He stopped suddenly, with a cry of astonishment.

Huddled up on the running-board, in the position of a suppliant, her little face framed by an immense woollen hood tied under the chin, looking more than usually frail because of the camel-hair coat with its wide shoulders, her wilful chin taking, for once a humble angle, her hands (in thick woollen gloves) clasped round her prettily shaped legs, Philippa was considering him with her grey eyes which, this evening, were as placid as lakes undisturbed by the slightest wind.

"What are you doing here?" he asked angrily.

There was a touch of vulgarity in his voice.

She continued to look at him, hoping to soften his features. One or two rebellious curls had escaped the domination of the hood and lay querulously on her forehead. Her skin was soft and clear as if it mirrored the purity of her thoughts as well as the health and youth of her body. Her eyes, in spite of the harshness of his words, remained like deep water, clear and cool after the morning storm when their colour had been harder, and darker. Her feet were absurdly small, and she had something of Hans Andersen's pathetic little match girl. She had become, like her, an angel of submission and modesty. The need for pardon was written all over her face.

"I suppose," asked Johnny sarcastically, "you've come to do a bit of spying?"

For more than an hour, during his walk across the fields, he had been fuming against her, and now, for the first time, he laid a hand on her, brutally, to throw her out of his way. She could see the veins in his neck swelling and protruding as they do when a man loses his temper.

His cheeks were flushed and his eyes cold. She could hardly believe this transformation. Having thrust a knife into his heart that morning, she was now quite surprised to find that it had hurt! In his desire to open the door of the cab and drive off, he knocked her off the running-board, and she fell with a bump on the cement floor.

"What are you doing?" she cried out, so pitifully, that her voice seemed dead.

Panic had seized her. Was he putting it on? Alas, there could be no question of this. By now, the muscles, as well as the veins of his neck, had expanded to such an extent that she expected his collar to fly open. He hated her so much that if she had been a man, she thought, he would probably have punched her.

The more he appeared to hate her, the more she wanted to throw herself round his neck. She asked imploringly.

"Where are you going?"

"What's it matter to you? Go back where you come from. I don't want to see you again, ever!"

"Johnny! You can't mean that!"

"I do," he exclaimed bitterly.

"You're out of your senses! Has something new happened?"

She was still not able to believe that what she had done in the morning was sufficient to kill his love for her. She had told him to go. He was going. But now what he wanted was never to see her again! At this new threat, her femininity leapt up in revolt. The anger, the brutality, the vulgar words—these she could deal with. Even his going away was almost a compliment, showing submission to her will. But not to want to see her again! Had she lost her good looks, her charm, her seduction? She sprang up, ready to fight with everything at her command, and

clinging to his jacket, looked up into his eyes until, by will power, she forced them down towards the bloom on her cheeks, to her nostrils, and finally to her quivering lips. Immediately, she saw her opportunity.

"Oh, Johnny! Johnny!"

Her mouth, offered sensuously, open just enough to show the whiteness of her teeth, waited for the kiss she knew must come. His lids had flickered. His breathing had grown faster and shorter. His heart was thumping. She held him like a prey. Her long, white fingers mauled the cloth of his jacket. She held him tight. He would never escape from her again. Their lips met and greedily they quenched their thirst.

At last she whispered.

"Get in quick, Johnny. I'm coming with you."

"But you don't know . . ." he objected haltingly.

"I know everything," she answered.

She had jumped up in front of him and already was nestling in the seat next to his, and her eyes had become blue and triumphant.

XXVII

THE lorry, its steel frame vibrating with the slowly turning engine, crept forward to the garage entrance where it paused enquiringly before crossing the pavement into the High Street where by now the shops were closed, and only the street market, with the acetylene flares on the barrows (behind the clock tower) gave warmth and colour to the night.

Philippa, making herself as tiny as she could, keeping her head back in case, which was hardly to be supposed, anybody recognised her by the sudden glare of a street lamp, felt her heart bursting with joy. She could see Johnny's face, pale and anxious, absorbed in the business of driving the lorry safely out of town. His lips, still warm from hers, were tightly pressed as his eyes glanced from one pavement to the other, amongst the shadows, for the slightest sign of danger which they both imagined might surprise them before their dream was over.

Though the lorry was only moving strictly within the speed limit, Philippa could feel its hidden power, and she had the impression of a traveller listening to the throb of a great liner as it pulls slowly out of port on its way to a distant continent. A red lamp on the dashboard cast its warmth over the speedometer and the various gauges, and before they had set off Johnny had undone his wristwatch (the one which had been through all his campaigns in the

East) and hung it up so that they could see the time as they travelled.

They left the town by the building yard and the bridge and now, as Philippa looked cautiously out, she was about to see roll past her, to the grind of the heavy wheels, the caravan, the research station, the Saxon church, the rectory, the signposts leading to the artificial lake, the schools and the Manor House. Here, in this tiny piece of England, all her happiness, her disappointments, her strong emotions had taken place. Gripping the bottom of the dashboard with the tips of her fingers to steady herself because of the rocking of the lorry where the road was bad, she glanced first at one thing, then at another, with the feverish desire to look at each as long as possible without missing the next. Suddenly she felt like crying and laughing together, laughing because for the first time in her life she was free, travelling with the man she loved along this road upon which, during sleepless nights, she had looked out, envying the people who were driving along it to places full of romance—and crying because in the rectory dining-room (how faded the green blinds were!) her parents would soon be looking for her. She would not be there for supper. In the study, afterwards, Marc would turn towards the open door hoping she would suddenly come in; Mrs. Dale would exclaim above the sound of her knitting needles: "I do wish I knew where the child has gone!"; at bedtime they would telephone to the hospital ("the road has become a real death trap, Marc!"); they would stay awake all night conjecturing . . . But the lorry bounded past, jerking round the bend between the Manor House and the schools, the schools where Johnny had put his head through the door that Monday morning during the lesson on Absalom, the schools where Prudy would go on teach-

ing till she had her baby, because now she would need every penny she could earn.

The lorry as it hurried forward was leaving a trail of misery behind it, but ahead, the road was as straight as a ribbon, and the night was magnificently clear.

She could now safely lean out of the window and breathe deeply the refreshing air. Johnny had not said a word. He respected her emotions. She could afford to enjoy this moment of silent retrospection. She had won him back and was again sure of his love.

Her fingers were numbed by the sharp edge of the dashboard and she slipped back deliciously into her seat, sniffing, as if it were the very essence of romance, the smell of petrol and oil which permeated everything in the cab, for this was her first experience in a machine which appeared to her so powerful, so sonorous, that at any moment she half expected it to take off like an aeroplane and wing its way across the world.

She had not questioned Johnny about their destination.

As they followed the eternal ribbon of their headlights, as the heat of the engine rose in torrid puffs, as she nestled closer to him, laying her head with abandon against his shoulder, the end of the journey and Johnny were being gradually merged by her imagination into one. She had only to stay close to him. Wherever he went would bring them imperceptibly to that state she had always longed for—to be alone, just the two of them together, on a desert island, on the top of a mountain, lost in the jungle, floating on a raft in the middle of the sea!

From time to time, she half closed her eyes (because it was so beautifully warm and she could see nothing of the country outside), but she was far too excited, far too much in love, to sleep!

After they had travelled a long time, he drew up about thirty yards beyond a roadhouse and asked her to buy some food and drink. He put his hand into an inner pocket, pulled out a wallet, and said suddenly:

"I've just remembered. I haven't any money."

She looked at him with big, drowsy eyes, full of love, and answered.

"I've got lots, Johnny. Don't worry."

She jumped down to the ground, as light as a bird.

They munched their sandwiches and ate their cakes as they drove farther into the night, and now the country was becoming more hilly, and there were tall trees.

Perhaps because they were glad to eat (neither of them had eaten anything since breakfast), perhaps because they felt safer in these desolate roads where there would be nobody until morning, perhaps because they had already used up so much of their night's happiness that from now on, every hour must do the work of a year—perhaps because of all these things together, they began to talk avidly, each anxious to let the other into the secret of what he had been thinking during the first part of the drive.

She said reflectively.

"If the thing hadn't happened, Daddy would have married us at Easter."

The thing had no other name. She had promised herself not to mention, ever again, the discovery in the church.

Johnny answered.

"My dad must have asked yours in the churchyard this morning. That's more or less what he went for. I know my dad. He's slow, but when he says he'll do a thing, he does it. And mum had made him promise."

"Yes," agreed Philippa. "Thanks, Johnny. I expect it was all settled."

"What would have been the use?" asked Johnny.

But she was inquisitive.

"Johnny. Where would we have gone for a honeymoon?"

She continued greedily.

"The first time you saw me at the reservoir, what did you find in me?"

He laughed because the picture of her against the rather stormy water, the picture of her hair blown about by the wind, the picture of her legs, and the feel of her waist when he had touched her were things that still made him feel giddy. His arm crept round the big woolly coat, and he squeezed her.

"What did I find in you?" he asked. "It's difficult to explain. I saw that, for me, you were all the women in the world. Does that make sense?"

"No," she answered. "Explain!"

"I saw that there must have been things I knew nothing about."

"What things?"

"Long chestnut hair that gets blown about in the wind, and legs that make a man feel funny in the stomach, and especially . . ."

He was floundering delightfully. The little veins were sticking out in his forehead. His fingers closed round her breast.

She asked seriously.

"And the beautiful Eastern girls?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I can't explain. I suppose it just had to be you."

She gave a shiver of contentment.

"That makes your love fresh and clean," she murmured. "You've been to so many places and seen so

many things, whereas I've only just opened my eyes on the world. I opened them on you, Johnny. Do you realise what that means? I dreamt always of something tremendous happening to me like this drive to-night. Now that it's here, now that I'm with you, nothing more wonderful can ever happen. In the morning I shall collapse with happiness like a butterfly gorged with sunshine."

They continued to talk in this strain whilst the noise in the cabin increased.

For some time the road which had been passing through what was obviously rich and magnificent country with, occasionally, farms and thatched cottages, churches partly hidden behind clumps of still leafless trees, and here and there, some walled and erstwhile prosperous county estates, had suddenly begun to climb a road so steep that it twisted serpentwise through plantations of robust trees against the trunks of which the headlights made beautiful effects.

The rich, damp undergrowth of moss and pine needles smelt so good that this heady perfume came vigorously into the cabin through the open window as if to insist that the travellers were now approaching their destination. Distantly, Philippa could hear, above the noise of the engine, the battling of rapid water, and from time to time, as they climbed and swung, the headlights would pick out two or three pretty chalets painted in bright colours with arbours, and beds of tulips.

Johnny knew at once that she was enchanted with this nocturnal fairyland. Her eyes which, because of their greyness, were always changing colour according to her mood and the things round her, were now alternately full of fire, coloured by the little red lamp on the dashboard, or mysteriously blue like the openings in the forest between

the trees. She clutched his arm, and exclaimed.

"It's as if we were climbing up into the sky!"

The great lorry was now advancing no faster than they could have walked. Here was a hamlet of a dozen houses clinging to the sides of the road which suddenly ceased its contortions, to shoot straight ahead under a long, dark tunnel of trees, to the plateau at the summit. The powerful engine, when finally it reached the top, gave a little burst of relief, but now, instead of following the road to whatever place it went, Johnny turned with a violent movement of the steering wheel, into a steep, grassy slope to the right, where he pulled back the hand brake as far as it would go before switching off the engine.

Anxious to take a big breath of this wonderful air, Philippa jumped down on the uneven grass, and was about to run forward a few yards to explore this romantic retreat when Johnny, who was just behind, gripped her elbow and gently drew her towards him. She lifted her face and whispered.

"I was right, wasn't I, Johnny? We're in the clouds, half way to heaven!"

"Yes," he answered, "above all the rest of the world."

They remained motionless, she nestling tightly in his arms, he with a cheek against her hair, while all the noises of the night beat round them—the barking of farm dogs ceaselessly answering each other down in the valley, the plaintive bleating of sheep quite near on the plateau, and the monotonous call of the screech owl in the trees above, these and a hundred other sounds their ears were not trained to distinguish. A mist was drifting towards them and, after a time, Johnny whispered.

"You must try to sleep. There's some hay at the back of the truck."

"I'm not tired," she answered, without moving.

"It's too damp to stay here, and there's a mist rolling over."

"What does that matter?"

"You will catch cold."

"I don't care what happens to me to-morrow."

She had closed her eyes. He could see her long lashes against the paleness of her skin, and like the time they were on the shore of the artificial lake, he slipped an arm round the small of her waist, pinching and gathering the soft, thick folds of the camel-hair coat. Then, with almost no effort at all, he swung her off the ground and carried her to the back of the truck which was full of the hay Bill had brought back from Bristol.

She curled up contentedly.

"Wait," he said, "I'll put my coat on your legs."

"No," she answered, catching hold of his hand, "I don't want your coat. I want you, Johnny."

He knelt down and bent over her.

"True?" he asked, peering anxiously into her eyes.

"True," she answered, "all the rest doesn't matter a bit."

Above them, the mist was now quite thick. Her arm was still under his, and he was asleep, breathing deeply and happily, his head against her breast. This was the moment, the magnificent moment beyond which she had nothing to ask. Her contentment was absolute. She had won him in spite of the world—her parents, the law, everything. Here, in the mountain mist, they were, as she had said, half way to the sky.

Johnny had not yet told her why he had chosen this desolate spot for the goal of their night's journey, but she was perfectly aware that for herself there could be no

to-morrow. Johnny, alone, could have escaped. His offence was not very grave in the eyes of the law. Supposing, at the worst, he had been sent to jail for a short time, the Fairchilds, who were easy-going people, could have sold their little business and started again with their son in some other part of the country. Johnny had merely to let her drop. She, on the other hand, was condemned by her principles and by the dishonour she had heaped upon her rigorous-minded family. The magnificence of this moment would be followed by others when shame would colour her cheeks.

But though Johnny could have escaped, he never intended to do so. She had guessed that immediately. Had not Prudy quoted him as saying: "Nobody is ever to know where I'm going"? At the garage, after their reconciliation, he had muttered haltingly: "You don't know . . ." And she had answered quickly: "Oh, yes, I do!"

This piece of rough, sloping grass with the bonnet of the truck pointed towards the sound of the turbulent river (his hand had gripped her tightly when her steps wandered too far) had hardly been chosen without thought, but though all these things together confirmed her belief, she would wait for him to say the first word, to taste fully the extent of her sacrifice.

And yet it was not being particularly brave to follow him to the very end, no more brave than for a mother to throw herself into the flames to rescue her child. She could not live without him. Yesterday evening, at the mere thought that he might drive away and leave her, she had been utterly overwhelmed. The running-board of the lorry had appeared to her as if, drowning, she had suddenly seen a lifebelt floating in her direction. She had seized it. If

Johnny had pushed her away, if he had said to her at that moment: "Your hardness this morning froze me up. Go! I hate the sight of you!" If he said that! Well, the fact that he hadn't said it, the fact that he had held out his hand to her, made her cling to him even more desperately. The sort of love she was now conscious of feeling for him must follow blindly the object of its adoration through every vicissitude. He had done wrong, but she must follow him. She came of a blameless family. The man she loved had stumbled. But she would follow him like the heroine in George Sand's *Leone Leoni* followed the man she loved through everything, through theft, through murder, to death. Her love in the end would redress his wrong, and put everything right. It was much righter of her to do this than to drape herself in a hard and dignified virtue. Her ambition at school had not been to become a film star, a great musician, a wonderful singer—she had merely wanted to be good. To be good, to love surpassingly, forgiving everything, bringing both herself and Johnny back to the right path, was now her only desire. Already he was proving worthy of her love. He was trying to atone for his wrong. He might have gone to Liverpool and signed as a stoker on a cargo ship to return to his beloved Far East. Instead of that, unmindful of her harshness, he had taken her by the hand. He loved her more than his liberty. He was ready to die for her, with her.

"I shall never," she went on, "know what it is to be disappointed with my husband (she considered, with some justification, that she was married to Johnny before God). For a romantic soul like mine, I can ask nothing more satisfying."

She looked down, trying to make out his features through the darkness, and added:

"He'll never grow bald, or snore at night, or make a noise when he eats his porridge. He'll never grow tired of me, or slip out in the evening to drink with his friends. We shall just continue our honeymoon."

She wondered how he could sleep so peacefully when each minute tugged at her heart.

The mist had suddenly lifted, and they were about to see the birth of a new day.

In spite of her determination to remain awake, it had been so marvellous to feel herself losing consciousness against the warmth of a man's body, listening to his respiration, so gentle, and the beating of his heart, that she must have dozed—how long, she could not tell. Very carefully she lifted her arm from under him, and stealthily, crept down from the hay on to the rough grass. The night—for it was still completely night—was, by now, breathless and, except for the distant and monotonous roar of water, absolutely silent. She strained her ears to be sure. No owl hooted now. The cows had stopped coughing, and the sheep bleating. The farmyards were quiet; even the dogs had ended by curling up in their kennels.

The sky was full of dark cloud, darkest where the sky met the most distant trees of the valley in the bowl of which floated the remains of the mist. A short, horizontal line, no longer than a pencil, marked the place where the sun would rise. Only one human habitation showed a light, an orange light, but it was a long way off. She wondered what time it was. Johnny's wristwatch was on the dashboard of the lorry.

Looking over her right shoulder, in the direction of the

mountain road up which they had climbed, she suddenly saw some clouds divide and reveal a full moon, but quickly they re-formed, though the sky was lighter where she had seen the apparition, than in the east. A clump of pine trees, bathed in cream and quite beautiful, marked the top of the road.

But it was the valley which held her attention.

High above it shone a magnificent star, so big, so bright, that it must have resembled the one which guided the shepherds to Bethlehem. Probably it had a famous name. Gregory had been good on the stars, but she had been hopeless at recognising even the best known. She thought it must be the north star.

Behind her, the moon was taking another quick peep at the earth, and during its presence the trees below looked like people gesticulating and gossiping.

She was grateful for these few moments all to herself. It was like being in some great cathedral, the only person amongst rows and rows of empty chairs, taking counsel with heaven before a solemn happening. Though she was waiting to see dawn break, she prayed it would not come too soon, for this night had given her the joys of a lifetime, and daylight would shatter them, and shatter her. An owl hooted as if to reassure her that night was still with them, but almost immediately a cock crowed. She looked round, less in control of her nerves, but to her intense happiness, Johnny was hurrying towards her, running his fingers through his hair to comb it off his forehead. He looked beautifully slim and lithe. "Thank God," she murmured, "I couldn't have remained another moment alone."

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

She sensed that he was looking for a phrase, that he wanted to thank her, but the words refused to come.

Words seemed so unnecessary that she did not even make an effort to help. They were much more at ease in each other's presence. Something had knit them indissolubly together.

She remained thus a long time, her head hidden in his shoulder. When she looked up, she exclaimed, almost in terror.

"It's getting light!"

The day was breaking.

A wind had mysteriously risen, and was beating against her legs. The grass was turning white. The slates of the houses were shimmering silver. The big star had turned pale, and the first rooks were rising from the treetops making raucous cries. The trees themselves, because of the wind, were gently swaying. An insect buzzed near her forehead. Lights appeared from windows in the valley. A train whistled distantly.

Clasped together, they watched the transformation.

The speed of it was what frightened them.

Every instant brought a change. The tempo quickened. The call of the rooks became more insistent. Cocks crowed in answer to each other, and all the dogs in the farms began to bark. There were lights everywhere along the farther bank of the river. The deep indigo clouds in the east were being broken up by that pencil of light which had turned from silver to rose.

Philippa turned round.

"The moon!" she exclaimed.

All the clouds round it and in front of it had melted, and its fullness was fringed with fire, but in spite of this, it retained its cold appearance, in a cold, blue sky.

She turned away expecting by now to see the sun pointing up on the horizon. Daylight was arriving from everywhere simultaneously, but there was no sun, only the red

pencil among lingering patches of indigo. The day had not arrived from the place she had expected.

Small birds crossed in front of her with their song of spring.

The moon with its fiery halo was amazingly and cruelly bright. The wind was mounting, and the grass was of a colour she had never seen grass before. The mist was lifting from the valley. Johnny and she, moved by the same thought, peered over the boulders and treetops into the ravine where the waters tumbled, and a train was puffing towards the station.

The sun appeared, magnificently hot and golden.

All sorts of tender colours sprang into the sky—pastel shades, delicate blues and pinks, spread out like lengths of lingerie silk. The moon, after its moment of vicious glory, lost its strength and paled like the brightest star into insignificance.

A lamb bleated not far away.

"It's getting late," said Johnny, "we ought to . . ."

"Not yet," she pleaded, cutting him short, "it's only just day. Only five minutes ago it was dark, pitch dark."

She was clutching at the lapels of his jacket while her cheek rubbed against his shoulder. She would have liked to get closer to him, right up to his skin. She was much less brave than she had imagined during the waking hours of the night when dawn seemed such a long way off.

Johnny, also, was trying to beat back a violent desire to take her head between his hands and bury his face in her hair. He could have cried, cried desperately, not because he was a coward about driving over the cliff (he had enormous will power when it came to physical courage), but he suddenly realised that he had never loved her enough. If he had loved her really, instead of having



been half in love and half anxious to make money, their happiness would only just be beginning.

She was unbelievably beautiful. He kept on recalling that day when he had put his arm round her on the shore of the artificial lake. His reluctance to talk to her parents showed that he had not appreciated sufficiently the amazing thing he had come up against. It was as if he had discovered a diamond and not realised its value.

She was purer even than a diamond.

Why had nobody told him to what lengths a woman will go when she is in love? He had disgraced her—her and all her family—and what was she doing? Waiting to drive over the cliff with him. That was the way a woman loved.

What wonderful creatures women are! thought Johnny. Why do men spend so much time *not* thinking about them—going to wars, sailing across oceans, driving aeroplanes, building bridges, wasting their time at the wheel of a truck!

If he could only have told her what was in his mind! But she was probably angry with him because he had fallen asleep after their wedding in the hay!

When he heard her heart beating so quickly, he decided she was not angry but afraid.

But, in fact, Philippa was not afraid.

Her mind worked so much quicker than Johnny's and when he thought her preoccupied with some idea, she had already moved on to something else. Actually, at this present moment, nothing seemed to matter any longer to her but the miracle of the night. She was thinking that perhaps she might already be two persons instead of one, and a thirst for life overcame every other emotion.

Their marriage under the stars filled her with gratitude

towards Johnny. Whatever he might think, the fulfilment of their love dazzled her and made her greedy for the future, and now, the breaking of a new day seemed magnificently to foreshadow the creation of a family.

Momentarily her happiness was complete. Even her love had a contentment about it which was quite different from anything she had experienced before. Johnny was here. There was a bond between them. She was almost willing to forget what had taken place in the rectory, with the sacks of corn in the church, because these things had precipitated their union, and as she continued to look up at him, as her lips trembled, she felt sure that he must see how things had changed.

She whispered:

"Johnny, it's the lambing season. Can you hear?"

Indeed from everywhere came the bleating of lambs, and from the direction of the road voices of men, probably shepherds.

"Everything is waking up," she went on softly, "it reminds me of daylight after the bombers had passed. One suddenly forgot what it was to be afraid. One felt merely happy to be alive."

"But . . ."

He was not sure what to say. He felt that it was his duty to prevent her from weakening and muttered:

"We must be brave."

To his surprise, she exclaimed:

"That's what I mean. Now we're married. I might be like Prudy. Do you understand? It would be so wonderful!"

He suddenly realised that she was following quite a different train of thought from his own, and cried:

"Good God! Could that be? Why, of course . . ."

Then, gripping her arms, he said:

"If it were all right by you, Philippa, I would go back and face up to things. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," she answered, "I've been trying to explain. Now that I'm your wife nothing can hurt us."

But he still felt uncertain. There lingered in his mind the possibility that she would think him a coward for abandoning too easily their heroic resolutions. As much for his own benefit as for hers, he repeated:

"Am I to go back? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," she answered.

The sun was warming his back and he passed his fingers over his chin, ashamed to be unshaven. The mist was clearing from the valley and now the houses gleamed and smoke rose from all the chimneys.

"It's going to be a magnificent day," he said simply.

The little train which had stopped in the station now moved off jerkily like a toy. A ferry boat slid from its moorings into the green eddies off shore. Wide-winged birds circled over the calm salmon pools. A man with a horse appeared on the other side of the river where hundreds of fine trees had been felled.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"There's rather a nice inn down there," he answered, "I stopped there once. We could have breakfast."

He was almost ashamed of having mentioned breakfast when, if they had been braver . . . But no, he shuddered at the very thought of the crime they had nearly committed. His young wife, the appellation brought a flush of pride to his cheeks, looked fresh and desirable. She was smiling and her hair was blowing in the wind.

"We could leave the lorry here," he suggested, "and walk down."

"Let's," she assented submissively.

He took her by the hand, and soon, as they ran lightly over the little white pebbles of the narrow, winding path, they discovered again all the joys of living. There were violets in the ditches and japonica against gleaming cottage walls and in tiny orchards marked off by low stone walls there were mares with their foals and goats with their kids. Everywhere life seemed to be starting afresh.

As they turned a bend they came upon what must have been a very old church with its heavy bell hanging between oak beams on the summit of the tower. The churchyard was picturesque but smaller than Marc's. The sight of this sleepy church and garden suddenly checked Philippa's unclouded happiness. She realised confusedly that she would be obliged to let Johnny go back alone to face whatever was coming to him. He would have to explain things in a dignified way to his parents, to hers and to the police. His crime was little more than a technical one, but whatever happened she was now one with him. It was her belief in the future that was sending him back.

But for her it was different. Though neither Marc nor her mother would necessarily criticise her openly, she was not willing to face their covert looks of disapproval. What had happened on the mountain top during the night was no escapade but the start of a new life, and in this new life she was determined to see everything through the eyes of her husband; as in the solemn vow of the marriage service, 'forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him.' In the low bough of a yew tree like the one beside Gregory's grave, a robin was chirruping. As she looked at the graceful creature she wished that unseen, or in the

guise of this bird, she could have flown to the rectory to perch herself on her father's shoulder and peck him good-morning. For though she realised the impossibility of taking up things where they had left off, she was ashamed to think how anxious and unhappy at this moment her parents must be.

Johnny, who had been silently watching her, had guessed what was in her mind. He was afraid by a misplaced word to kindle again her resentment, for the church with its squat tower reminded him uncomfortably of the one where he had hidden those trouble-making sacks of corn, but almost immediately Philippa slipped her hand in his, and he saw in her eyes that all her thoughts were now in the future.

As they hurried to the bottom of the steep lane the roar of the river became louder. There were bright, sunny cottages and a luxurious hotel which the painters were getting ready for the fishing season and at the bottom of the lawn the toy-like railway station which they had looked down on from the top of the mountain. A ferry took them across the river and soon they were climbing the steep lane leading to the inn on the opposite shore.

It was a small, low house with two wings jutting out from the central part in which was an old-fashioned bar with copper warming pans hanging from the walls, and hyacinths and daffodils arranged amongst moss in wicker baskets. A dark-haired maid, so early wearing a well-ironed cap, was polishing the brass, whilst two large dogs, happy to sniff the morning air, were chasing birds and cats on the front drive, occasionally barking from joy.

They had breakfast by a window overlooking the river. It was their first breakfast together and they were on their honeymoon. One of the two women partners of the inn,

tall and portly with a complexion that looked as if it had been scrubbed with soap and water, a red knitted shawl over her ample shoulders, brought them steaming coffee and eggs and bacon—two eggs for Johnny because, as she said, he was the man. "Men have larger appetites," she said decisively, and it was clear that she had for the strong sex a quite Victorian veneration. Whereupon: "My wife," put in Johnny, secretly flattered by this attention, "would like to stay here for a few days. I shall be going back to town but not for long—just to attend to some urgent business."

"I have a very comfortable room," answered the landlady, "I will have it made up whilst you are finishing breakfast."

She looked at Johnny approvingly. He was the sort of man who commanded attention.

When they passed out into the bar again the two dogs—they were brown spaniels—lay on the carpet on either side of a crackling fire. The brass pans sparkled. Everything was neat, clean, brightly rubbed.

But the very warmth of the scene made Philippa feel more wretched at the thought of the loneliness ahead.

"I'm going to miss you horribly," she exclaimed with a catch in her throat. "I don't feel brave any longer."

He glanced quickly at her, thinking he liked her best when she looked so feminine and ready to cry, and he whispered protectively:

"You're beginning to feel the strain, and no wonder. I'm tired myself, but so happy. Think what a wonderful time we are going to have. Besides, unless they detain me, or something, I'll come back for a few moments, just to kiss you, this evening or to-morrow. You'll want some clothes, I expect."

"Oh yes," answered Philippa. "Ask Prudy!"

She was on the point of saying something else when she checked herself. She did not want the conversation to wander even for a moment beyond herself and Johnny. She added, looking valiantly out of the window:

"You must go back now, I suppose."

"Why yes, now," admitted Johnny, still watching her closely to see if she was crying, "but I think I ought to look at your room first. I would like to see where you will sleep to-night. I expect it will be quite a good room but it would be safer."

"Safer?" she queried.

"I mean," he explained, blushing, "if you didn't like it, a man has more authority . . . The landlady would have to change it. But, of course, she looks quite a good person."

"Do you think she really believes we're married?" asked Philippa suspiciously, without taking her eyes off the muslin-curtained window. She would have liked to control the sudden beating of her heart, and the question was so strained that she could scarcely recognise the texture of her voice.

"Why shouldn't she believe us?"

Unconsciously Philippa was screwing round her engagement ring. There was a pause. Then Johnny said:

"Of course. I'm stupid. I suppose women notice those things. Oh, I would hate anybody to hurt you with a look, especially when . . . I mean, when it's true as it is in our case. By the way, if we stayed here three weeks we could be married in the little church we stopped at coming down from the mountain. It is three weeks, isn't it?"

"It could be."

"I think it would be nicer. I mean it would give us

the feeling of starting from scratch. But naturally it's up to you."

The partner in the red knitted shawl, arriving suddenly from the direction of the dining-room, her smile spreading from one side of her radiant face to the other, her voice deep, resonant and hearty, asked imperiously:

"Are you ready to see the room, Mr. . . .?"

"John Fairchild," said Johnny firmly, "and Mrs. Fairchild."

"If it were in season," explained the partner, puffing slightly and lifting up a trap in the bar to let them pass, "I would put you both in the guest wing. I expect you're newly married, aren't you? But until Easter I like to keep any visitors in the middle of the house. It's not only that I can keep an eye on their wants, but the rooms are warmer above the bar and if you are only coming to join your wife to-morrow, Mr. Fairchild" (she turned quickly in the narrow stairs to stress this part of her discourse), "she might be glad to sleep near Doris, my partner, and me."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure Mrs. Fairchild would be very pleased," put in Johnny quickly.

"And you'll bring your ration books, won't you?"

"To-morrow, without fail, I promise you."

"If it's to-morrow, that will be quite sufficient. Now here's your room, I thought. It's right over the tap room but not noisy enough to prevent you from sleeping." She paused ominously. "The bathroom is in the corridor. The first door. The third on the right is us—my partner Doris and I. Now, supposing I leave you a moment to look round? You won't forget to sign the register when you come down, will you, Mr. Fairchild?"

"No, indeed," answered Johnny.

She closed the door almost softly behind her as if to show she knew and blessed them. Philippa looked round, and then said urgently:

"Kiss me, Johnny."

He took her in his arms. She whispered:

"Aren't people nice?"

"What people?"

"She. The woman in the red shawl. She knows, but she's nice."

He asked nervously:

"What does she know?"

"That we're not married. In a church, I mean."

He appeared to turn the matter over in his mind, and then answered reflectively:

"People are nice, much nicer than we take them for, often."

He looked over his shoulder and continued:

"I've just thought of something."

"What?" she queried.

He left her, wide-eyed and anxious, standing on the middle of the carpet, whilst he went over to the bed, but when he reached it, he obviously lacked the necessary courage to go through with what he had in mind for he said lamely:

"I suppose it's being under the same roof. We've never been under the same roof—to do what we liked, I mean. That red pillar box and the lane behind the rectory nearly drove me crazy. They left me with such an unsatisfied feeling. Even when we had kissed longer than usual. Then I used to go home with the shivers and wish I could have kissed the pillow on your bed. Does it sound very silly to you?"

"No," she said, "go on."

"I mean . . . could I kiss this one?"

He drew himself up and added hoarsely:

"Come on! What will that woman think? Besides, I've got to go back, haven't I?"

There was nobody in the bar when they came down. Until Easter the inn would obviously be empty and, with so few cars about because of the petrol restrictions, the depths of the country had taken on the quietness and charm of a past century. Perhaps that was why the woman in the red shawl had been so friendly and the breakfast so copious. The spaniels were by the fire, but merely lifted their heads drowsily from their golden, outstretched paws. In the steep descending lane the air was sweet with country smells and the sun covered the opposite bank with a cloak of gold.

"We'd better ask somebody when the ferry runs," said Johnny vaguely, as he looked down on the flat-bottomed boat attached to a cable stretched across the river. His customary urge to get things done had faded, and he was almost resentful with the ferry for being on the near shore.

"Who shall we ask?" queried Philippa.

Now that they were level with the water, the narrow path was muddy. There were boatyards and a few mean cottages, in the front windows of which their owners sold sweets and postcards or trinkets to those leaving or arriving by the ferry in the summer months. The sun gleamed on little rock gardens, and the river sent up its own peculiar smell tinged with a distant perfume borne on a spring breeze of newly-cut trees rich with sap.

Philippa could not take her eyes off the river. She repeated tonelessly the query: "Who shall we ask?" for there was nobody visible—the only signs of people being

the presence of the ferry and wisps of smoke coming up from the chimneys of the cottages.

The water lapped against the mud banks and went off in little ripples chasing other ripples towards the greenness of the distant scenery. There were violets whose perfume she suddenly became aware of, joined to the other perfumes.

Johnny had stopped going forward. He sensed that the ferryman must be in one of the cottages, and that the moment had come to say good-bye to Philippa.

"I'll go and look," he said dully.

She caught at the lapel of his coat and whispered urgently:

"Wait! Wait another moment!"

"No," he objected. "I must. I shall be back sooner."

"You don't know," she answered, tugging at his coat, her eyes suddenly moist. "This morning, when we stopped in front of the church half-way down the cliff, I tried to pretend it was just a technical crime, something that had no importance, but now . . ." She buried her head against his shoulder and continued in gulps: "Now, with this ferryman arriving in a few moments to take you away, don't let's be children any longer. What's wrong is wrong. There are no little crimes. When we do something that isn't right, we do it with our eyes open."

"I know," he answered gently. "I've never tried to whitewash what I did, but why do *they* make life so complicated?"

"That's their fault," she said. "But for us there's no being dishonest honestly. It begins in tiny ways, like getting things under the counter, and then one becomes accustomed to it . . ."

"Not you," he insisted.

"It's worse with me," she whispered, raising her tired

eyes. "I should have been able to prevent it. A woman ought to feel things when they are happening, instinctively. We are so much stronger morally than men. But I . . . I was nearly sending you back alone just because I was ashamed to face my parents." She bit her lips. "I still am ashamed. It will be terrible walking into the rectory, being obliged to explain."

"But you needn't," he said intently. "You've a room here."

She shook her head sadly.

"We shall drive back together. I really never meant to stay. I'm not such a coward as that."

He looked at her with new affection. Then suddenly:

"You're shaking all over. You're not ill or anything?"

"I'm afraid," she answered quietly.

"So much afraid of them?"

"Not only of them. Of being left with them for months, perhaps, while . . ."

She stopped short. Then queried with relief:

"Look! Is that not the man who ferried us across?"

Johnny made an effort to concentrate, and answered:

"I don't remember what he looked like."

He, too, was beginning to realise the seriousness of what lay ahead. The smallest theft was sometimes punished by a long sentence. What he had done, he had done with his eyes open, light-heartedly, treating it as a joke because so many others did the same. Afterwards he had profaned the church, not so much out of wickedness but because he had ceased to have due regard for what was decent and right. Now, if he were sent to prison, he would be separated from the only person in the world who mattered—from her and, perhaps, from their child. He felt sick. Everything became blurred, and he had a start when he heard Philippa say:

"Then I will ask him."

"Ask who?"

"The ferryman."

She went forward to where the man was standing with his hand on a shop door, and asked hesitatingly:

"The ferry—is it you?"

"Yes, miss, but not till five—not till the train comes in."

"Please, please. It's important. You see . . ."

"That's right. It is urgent," said Johnny, coming up.

"We would not ask you unnecessarily."

"Come in," said the man, opening the shop door, which rang a bell sharply. "I'll see what can be done."

He passed into an inner room, where a woman was cooking something on a wood-burning stove whose fumes were choking a baby in its perambulator.

"Why doesn't she leave it outside?" thought Philippa, shocked to see how little the sunshine was appreciated.

Johnny, his mind tortured by the expression of misery which now marked Philippa's features, looked down silently at the collection of cheap watches and rings in a tray on the counter. The very depth of their understanding made his crime seem larger. They had both lost their gaiety cruelly afraid of being torn from one another.

"If we could find a ring your size," said Johnny, taking up the tray and passing his index through the trinkets to scatter them, "you could wear it so that people would know. There would be nothing against that, would there?"

"No," she murmured. "We *are* married, really, and perhaps, before it can happen in a church we shall have to wait . . . a long time."

"I made you a promise," he went on, "to ask your father to marry us at Easter. That's the first thing I shall do when we get back. You won't go to the rectory alone.

I shall go with you."

He slipped one of the rings on her finger, and went on:

"Where I went wrong before was thinking I had to buy you things to make you love me. That's why I wanted to make money so much. I had an idea it was necessary to splash the money round. Since we have found each other, since last night, I mean, life, the mere fact of living is all I ask."

He looked up through the narrow shop door at the sunshine outside, and added:

"All those things I used to take for granted are what I want most desperately."

"Nobody can take them away from us—not if we have patience," she answered. "The days, the months, the seasons will go past. Everything will be forgotten. Then we shall start our lives from scratch—just *us* on a mountain top with nothing," she whispered, trying to laugh. "You remember what you said at the beginning in Dad's summer house?"

"Yes," he said, "I remember. All that is terribly worth looking forward to—whatever happens."

The ferryman came in and, seeing him, they squeezed hands.

Half-way across the river, standing at the end of the flat boat, they watched the man's back heave and the wide oars splash against the swollen water. A train came out of the tunnel in a cloud of black smoke, shaking itself clean as it ran into the mountain air. High up on the cliff the sun gleamed on the lorry which, from so far away, appeared like a speck.

THE END